

CAN SOMEONE PLEASE EXPLAIN WHAT'S GOING ON?!

4 ~A Sign-on-the-Line Wedding Story~



Author: *Tsurezurebana*
Illustrator: *Rin Hagiwara*

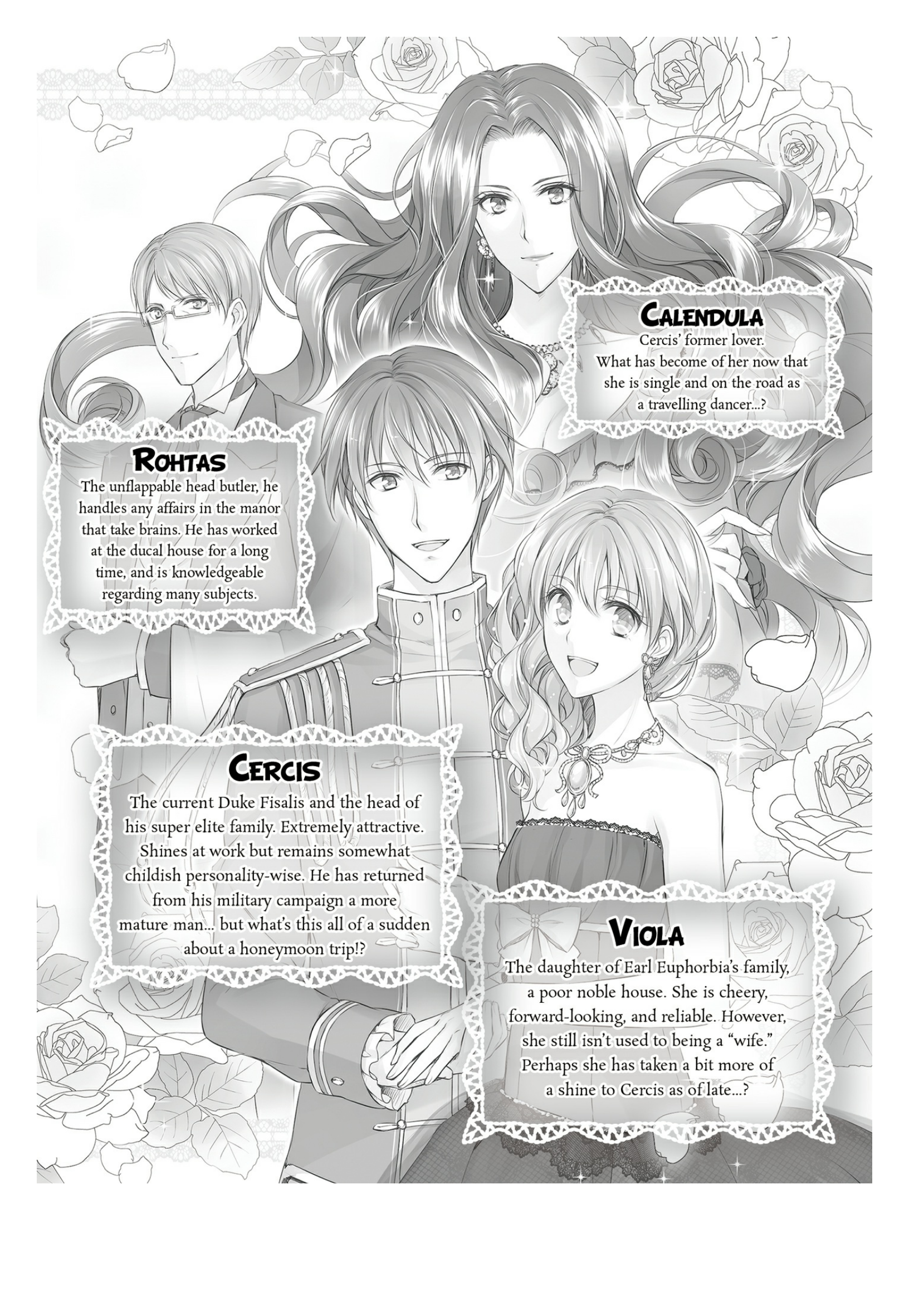
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ROHTAS

The unflappable head butler, he handles any affairs in the manor that take brains. He has worked at the ducal house for a long time, and is knowledgeable regarding many subjects.

CERCIS

The current Duke Fisalis and the head of his super elite family. Extremely attractive. Shines at work but remains somewhat childish personality-wise. He has returned from his military campaign a more mature man... but what's this all of a sudden about a honeymoon trip!?

CALENDULA

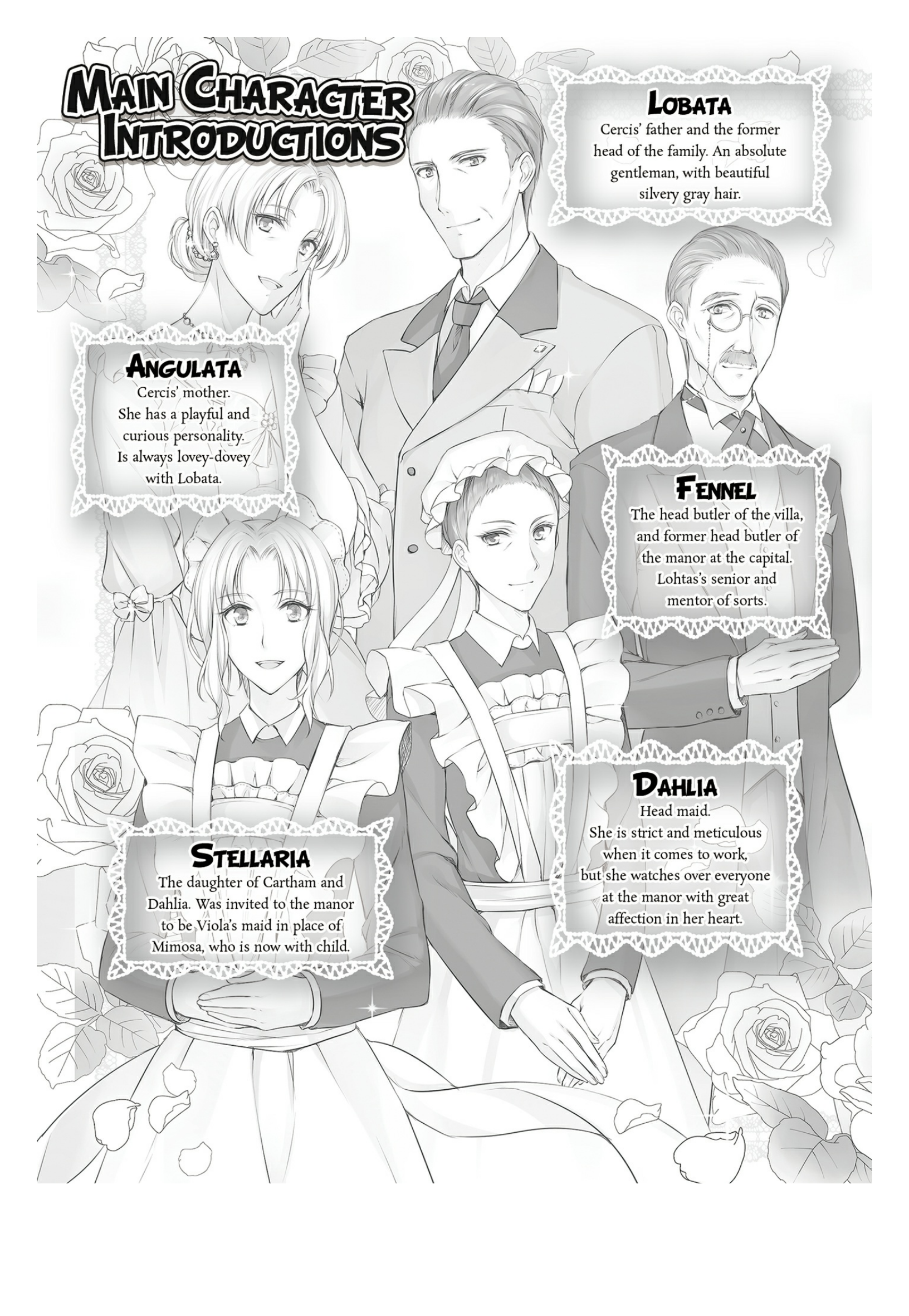
Cercis' former lover.

What has become of her now that she is single and on the road as a travelling dancer...?

VIOLA

The daughter of Earl Euphorbia's family, a poor noble house. She is cheery, forward-looking, and reliable. However, she still isn't used to being a "wife." Perhaps she has taken a bit more of a shine to Cercis as of late...?

MAIN CHARACTER INTRODUCTIONS



LOBATA

Cercis' father and the former head of the family. An absolute gentleman, with beautiful silvery gray hair.

ANGULATA

Cercis' mother.
She has a playful and curious personality.
Is always lovey-dovey with Lobata.

FENNEL

The head butler of the villa, and former head butler of the manor at the capital.
Lohtas's senior and mentor of sorts.

STELLARIA

The daughter of Cartham and Dahlia. Was invited to the manor to be Viola's maid in place of Mimosa, who is now with child.

DAHLIA

Head maid.
She is strict and meticulous when it comes to work, but she watches over everyone at the manor with great affection in her heart.

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Character Introductions](#)

[Prologue](#)

[1 — How Do You Do?](#)

[2 — Surprising Mr. Fisalis](#)

[3 — The Repatriation Ceremony](#)

[4 — After the Repatriation Ceremony](#)

[5 — An Unexpected Person](#)

[6 — Treasured Wife Syndrome?](#)

[7 — With My Parents](#)

[8 — After We Got Home](#)

[9 — Just a Little Dizzy In the Bath](#)

[10 — A Busy Morning](#)

[11 — Closet Check!](#)

[12 — Getting Ready for a Trip, I Guess](#)

[13 — The Purpose of the Trip \(and Where We Were Going\)](#)

[14 — Mr. Fisalis' Room](#)

[15 — And Off We Went!](#)

[16 — Arriving at the Territory](#)

[17 — A Walk, Not a Date!](#)

[18 — The Slightly Dangerous Town of Le Pied](#)

[19 — Kidnapped!?](#)

[20 — Time to Show His Stuff!!](#)

[21 — Continuing Our Stroll](#)

[22 — A Shocking Turn!](#)

[23 — Pressed for Answers](#)

[24 — A Heart-to-Heart](#)

[25 — A True Vow](#)

[Side Story — After the Fight with Calendula](#)

[Extra — Calendula's Letter to Viola](#)

[Bonus Textless Cover](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)

Prologue — The Day Before Mr. Fisalis' Return Home

Two and a half months had passed since Cercis, the current Duke Fisalis and head of the Fisalis family, had left for war with the southern kingdom of Aurantia. Thanks to his wife Viola's dutiful management of the manor while he was away, said manor did not, in fact, turn into a madhouse, but rather remained pe— Oh, my sincere apologies. I mean, thanks to his wife Viola's dutiful management, the days went by peacefully. Of course, everything wasn't left up to his wife alone. I—the Fisalis manor's butler, Rohtas—along with the head maid, Dahlia, and the other servants were all present to support Madam.

Although Master and Madam were separated by a vast distance, Master sent detailed letters from the frontline, so his presence remained strong in the manor. In fact, I have a feeling that his presence in Madam's mind grew even stronger during his absence. On the topic of changes, since Madam's personal maid Mimosa is with child, I sent for someone new to assist her. That person is the daughter of Dahlia and the head cook, Cartham. Her name is Stellaria, and she arrived a few days ago, straight from the Royal Palace where she had been working as a lady-in-waiting.

Stellaria was born and raised in the Fisalis manor, but she lived in a dormitory while attending vocational school, so it has been a long time since she's been back home. As one would expect from the daughter of those two exceptional individuals, she was an excellent student and had graduated at the top of her class. Dahlia and I had naturally assumed that she would be invited to work at the Fisalis manor as soon as she graduated, but she'd instead received a letter from the Royal Palace begging her to work *there*, so we'd had no choice but to surrender her. But now, she is ours once mo— rather, she is returning to the manor, much to our delight. Our back-and-forth with the Royal Palace came to an end when she moved back into the manor yesterday.

Unfortunately I did not have the time to allow her to settle in. Instead, I

promptly called her to my office, intending to give her an explanation of what was happening in the manor and whatnot.

“Hello, Stellaria. It’s good to see you again.”

“Same to you, Rohtas,” she said, looking back at me with a gentle smile as she took a seat on my office’s modest sofa. *The dress she is wearing suits her very nicely, with its dark blue color and girlish floral print.* Much like her parents, Stellaria was fond of lovely and beautiful things. *She’s grown into the spitting image of a proper lady, but I suppose she was like that even before she left.*

“I am well aware of your skills, Ria, so I’d like to put them to good use by having you serve Madam,” I told her, calling her by her childhood nickname. *No one is around to hear us, so it shouldn’t matter.*

“Why, of course! I’ll do my best,” Stellaria replied with a cheerful expression. I would usually say that she most resembled Dahlia with her neat and tidy appearance, but Stellaria most certainly got her smile from her father, Cartham.

“In that case, I will give you a brief outline of the goings-on at the manor. It has been five years since you left, so much has changed...” I started to explain to her, intending to bring her up to speed on all that had occurred since she returned. The biggest change being Master’s split with his companion... pardon me, Miss Calendula.

“Are you aware that Master was seeing someone?”

“Yes. Father and Mother told me they were living together in the cottage.”

“Then I take it you also know that Master married Madam.”

“I do. I was quite surprised to hear about it while at the Royal Palace. At first I thought that he was actually marrying his companion. I wondered if His Majesty had lost his marbles, allowing a union like *that*, but I was relieved to learn that wasn’t the case. But... he still had not split up with his companion at the time, had he?”

“Correct. Although they had been wed, he neglected Madam for some time and continued to live with his companion in the cottage. But...”

“But?”

“He eventually took notice of Madam’s honesty and cheerful nobility and, once drawn in by these charms, he realized he had made a mistake. Upon reflection, he finally broke things off with his companion.” *Er, it might be more correct to say that Master was dumped, though. A moment of silence for him, if you will.*

Stellaria seemed to have a general understanding of what had transpired, but she did not appear to have heard of Master’s laudable shift in personality and was visibly surprised by it. Indeed, when Stellaria had been living at the manor, Master had already been deep under his companion’s spell. Back then, he spent much time at her residence and frequently stayed the night. The servants were all more flabbergasted than shocked by such behavior. That is all in the past, however. Let us just call it his dark past— Er, a youthful indiscretion.

Not that I would ever forget it!

“So that’s how it went... I had heard that his companion had left, but there wasn’t time to go into any more detail than that, so I wasn’t aware of the exact sequence of events.” Stellaria had never managed to visit her home, busy as she was with her duties at the palace. She’d rarely had the chance to even sit down and talk with Cartham and Dahlia.

“Viola is a very kind person, so please do your utmost to attend to her every need, Ria. Unusual as she is...”

“She’s... unusual?” Stellaria asked, cocking her head at my casual mention of Madam’s character.

“Goodness, I didn’t mean ‘abnormal.’ Madam does not care for the usual things one would expect a lady of status to enjoy, and in fact likes to clean, do laundry, work in the garden, and so on,” I explained, choosing my words carefully. *She’ll see for herself shortly; I’m sure she’ll understand exactly what I mean then.*

“I heard that the Euphorbias, Madam’s own family, were not in a terribly good financial situation. Maybe her outlook is the result of that?” Stellaria guessed, discerningly. *Very astute of you!*

“Yes, unfortunately. It seems that her family did most tasks themselves, so even after she arrived here, she’s been working around the manor alongside

the servants.” A smile unintentionally spread across my face at the thought of Madam enjoying herself cleaning and decorating throughout the house. She truly breathed new life into the duke’s estate with her enthusiasm! *What I’m thinking about must be written all across my face—*

“Well, she certainly sounds like a cheerful person! Granted, my mother is very tolerant of that sort of thing,” Stellaria snickered. Perhaps she was imagining what her straight-laced mother’s face looked like at the sight of Madam traipsing about the manor with the servants.

“Madam has a certain charm that melts even a somber heart like Dahlia’s. I’m certain that you’ll grow fond of her, too, Ria.”

“You know what, I have that exact feeling. I’m very much looking forward to meeting Madam!” Stellaria said, her green eyes (clearly inherited from Cartham) sparkling in excitement.

“That is good to hear. Now then, I’ve been thinking of having you help Madam prepare for the repatriation ceremony in two days, so why don’t you go and do that?” I told Stellaria, outlining my plan.

“Huh? Starting the day after tomorrow? You don’t mean tomorrow, do you?”

“No, I do mean the day after tomorrow. Are you not tired from the move here from the palace, Ria? Take it easy these next two days to restore your energy. Madam is very energetic, so I’m sure you’ll have your hands full.”

“Understood! Thank you very much, Rohtas!” Judging from how my words made a smile blossom across her face, Stellaria hadn’t changed a bit from when she was small. She was like a daughter to me.

And so, a new face was added to the roster at the manor. *And then tomorrow, Master is to return from Aurantia.*

Yet more unprecedented days are about to begin.

1 — How Do You Do?

Although a tad weary, Mr. Fisalis returned home from Aurantia without a scratch. What's more, he actually participated in an event at the Royal Palace like a *real functioning adult*! We were all shocked at that, I tell you!

The Mr. Fisalis we knew would have probably said something like, "I skipped the dinner because I missed Viola so much," and would have just ignored the event, along with his subordinates (how is it that they can all do that, anyway?)

It's better that he's taking things more seriously now, I suppose. It's better that he is... well, better.

But he didn't stop with just attending the work function: he even obeyed me when I suggested he turn in early, exhausted as he was (although really, I also suggested this because the servants would have lost precious R&R time the later he stayed up). This, too, was unexpected.

I don't understand why he's suddenly gotten so obedient, but... well, I'll just be happy he made it home in one piece and leave it at that.

Just as I turned back towards my room, intending to go to bed after escorting Mr. Fisalis to his own chambers, Dahlia cleared her throat.

"Off to bed with you as well, then, Madam. Tomorrow you'll be going to the repatriation ceremony," she declared most unfortunately. It was just like her, though, to be calm and collected no matter the hour.

"Huh? Isn't my father-in-law going in our stead?" *He went to the deployment ceremony, so I was sure he'd go to this, too. So there's no point in me going as well, right?* I thought, tilting my head in confusion.

"It would not be at all unusual for you to go, considering it would be a hard-earned moment of glory for Master. The former duke and duchess will also be in attendance, so there's nothing for you to worry about," came the reply.

The earlier deployment ceremony was an event to send off the troops and wish them well amid lavish spectacle. Mr. Fisalis' special ops division generally

operated under secrecy, so they left with no such fanfare. *There were only regular soldiers at the deployment ceremony, if I recall. And some of them even tried hitting on me there... great, now I'm remembering something unpleasant. It was a good thing Mr. Fisalis wasn't there. If he ever found out I'd been hit on (and maybe accidentally hit on them back?), who knows what that idiot would do. Those guys narrowly escaped a painful death, what with Mr. Fisalis not being around!*

Anyway, let's just put those thoughts aside.

Right, this time around, Mr. Fisalis and the other division members would be the main focus of the ceremony. Buuuut, that and whether I actually wanted to go were two different things.

"No, no, my father-in-law being there isn't the problem, it's that I can't stand official functions..." I whined, earning me a scowl from Dahlia that scared me so badly my voice dropped to a mumble at the end.

"And besides! Mimosa still isn't feeling well, so she won't be able to transform me, right? The other maids could do a decent job, but it'll look sloppy without her finishing touches at the end, right? We can't let all of high society know what a plain, average girl I really am! Or rather, I can't let them see me like that." In truth, I wasn't sure who would have a harder time—my peers realizing what I really looked like, or me.

"That is no cause for worry. My daughter will be here tomorrow. *She* will get you ready." My opposition was dismissed like it was nothing.

"Who will do what now?" I literally did not understand the words that Dahlia was saying and stared dumbly, mouth slightly ajar.

"I already informed you of this matter some time ago. Mimosa's replacement."

"Oh! Yes, you did!"

"So you've remembered?"

"Yep!"

"Her replacement will be my daughter, Stellaria. I am quite relieved that we

acquired a suitable substitute in time for the repatriation ceremony.”

Ah, yes, that's right. Dahlia did tell me that her daughter would be coming here! She said right after Mimosa's pregnancy was revealed that she would hire a replacement. We have a lot of maids, but they each already have their own jobs to do, so we couldn't just tell one of them, "You're Madam's new personal maid starting tomorrow, 'kay☆"

This information had come out after the deployment ceremony, a month and a half ago.

On that note, up until now Dahlia and the other members of the Spa Squad had been taking turns helping me. I had been going to see Mimosa so frequently that I had completely forgotten about her incoming replacement!

“Okay, I remember now. Your daughter is coming tomorrow and her name's Stellaria, yes. I get it now. What a cute name!”

“Thank you very much. She has her faults, but I do hope you'll be a suitable match.”

It's not like you're giving her away for marriage, Dahlia! “I'm excited to meet her. I really hope we can be friends.”

“I'm sure you will. She is twenty-one, so not all that much older than you.”

“Oh really? She'll be like an older sister, then!”

“I'm honored to hear you say that. Do sleep well, now that you've been reassured.”

“Whaaat? But there's more I wanna ask! Like, does Stellaria look like you? Or does she take after Cartham?”

“...People often say she has her father's face...”

“She must be gorgeous, then! Not that she wouldn't be beautiful if she looked like you, though. She'd be pretty no matter which parent she looked like. I'm beyond envious! What's her personality like?”

“Hmm, how would I explain it? Perhaps it would be better if you observed her and learned for yourself. That would be one more thing to look forward to.”

“Oh! Good thinking!” Well said... not! Dahlia was definitely the more eloquent one in this conversation, I realized.

“Well then, tomorrow will be another early start, so be sure to get plenty of rest.”

“You bet! The sooner I go to bed, the sooner tomorrow will come, and the sooner I’ll get to meet your daughter!” I said, getting more and more excited.

I crawled under the covers at Dahlia’s behest.

So I’ll get to meet her tomorrow. And she takes after Cartham. Does that mean she’s the cute type? Maybe she’d be the elegant type if she resembled Dahlia. Hmph, it’s hard to picture what a combination of Cartham and Dahlia would be like. The both of them tend towards extremes, in a way. It’s really testing my imagination.

Either way, I’m totally looking forward to seeing what kind of person she is! I hope tomorrow comes quickly...

...Woah, it’s already morning...

“Good morning, Madam.”

“Morning, Dahlia.”

Bright sunlight filled my bedroom when Dahlia opened the curtains. What a refreshing way to wake up!

Dahlia came to wake me up, like she always did, but this time, the maid trailing behind her was neither Mimosa nor any member of the Spa Squad.

Huh, a new maid... Argh, I’m trying to think while half-asleep again. It’s Dahlia’s daughter, duh! I’m such a ditz when I first wake up. I guess it’s better than not waking up at all, though. Either way, I must be a sorry sight standing here in my nightgown.

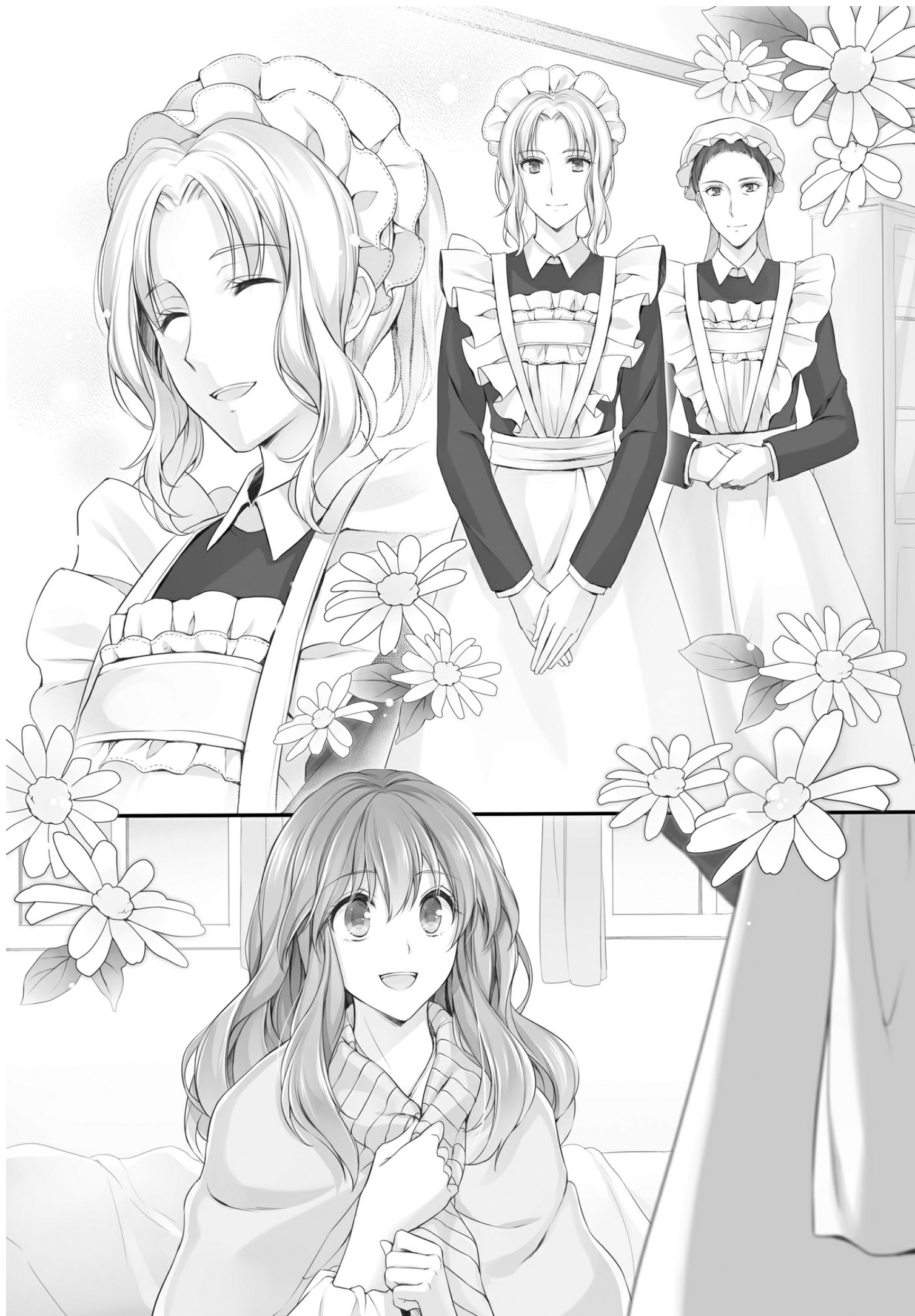
She didn’t much resemble Dahlia at first glance, but then again, that isn’t usually something you can tell right away.

Dahlia pointed out her daughter to me as I put on the shawl she’d handed me.

“I know it’s still very early, but I brought my daughter with me. This is Stellaria. She’ll be your helper, assisting you in getting ready and throughout your day, in Mimosa’s stead,” Dahlia said, introducing her daughter.

Just as Dahlia had told me yesterday, a gentle smile bearing a striking resemblance to Cartham’s spread lightly across Stellaria’s face.

“How do you do, Madam? I am Stellaria, Cartham and Dahlia’s daughter. It’s my utmost pleasure to serve you in Mimosa’s stead. I intend to put my heart and soul into this, so I do hope you’ll be pleased with me,” she said with a clear voice and a deep bow. *Her manners and attitude certainly do resemble Dahlia’s! And now that I think of it, so does her voice.*



Getting another good look at her face when she turned to face me, I saw that her wavy blonde hair and deep green eyes not only made for an impressively gentle look, but very much did resemble Cartham. *And the way she's allowed a little bit of her soft-looking hair to fall out of her bun is really stylish! Like Dahlia, she's not very tall—but she has Cartham's model-quality features. I thought she'd be more of the cute type, but I'm surprised by how refined she actually looks.*

"Stellaria! I'm Viola. It's a pleasure to meet you." I gave a little nod of my own.

Dahlia watched our introductions without a word, but spoke up here when we paused.

"Now that the introductions are out of the way, let's get you ready. Time is not on our side today," she said, returning us to our old routine.

"That's right. Let's try to be done before breakfast," Stellaria added, following in her mother's footsteps. *I shouldn't have expected these two would be on anything but the exact same wavelength.* I was strangely relieved.

"I'm going to draw your bath. I'll be back shortly," Dahlia said, turning to the bathroom.

"And I'll go take a look at your outfit and jewelry for the day." Outwardly, Stellaria's lenient attitude resembled Cartham the most, but her tone of voice and mannerisms were direct, just like Dahlia.

While Dahlia was away tending to the bath, Stellaria gathered my clothes and accessories from the dressing room. *Whoa, they're really in sync with each other.*

"We haven't the time today, so the Spa Squad won't be joining us, unfortunately. I'll be giving you a gentle massage instead."

"Fine by me." *Wow, she knew about the Spa Squad! She must have dived right into her new job.*

Stellaria kneaded my relaxed, post-bath body before she put on my makeup.

"Master and the knights will be in their uniforms today, so your own clothes will be a matching shade of navy, my lady. Navy is a neat and tidy hue, so I'm

certain you'll like it. It's a somewhat subdued color, however, so why don't we do something to liven up the look? You're still young, and it would be a terrible waste not to emphasize that. Oh, but don't worry, it won't be showy or gaudy! I'll keep you squarely in that simple style you favor so much. As for your hair, since you seem to usually wear it tied back, I think I'll put it in a twist for today. Changing up your look a bit will do you good."

"You're right. Go ahead and do that."

She must have gotten in touch with Mimosa already if she knows my preferences and usual hairstyle! She certainly didn't take her time getting used to her new job. And on top of that, she was more objective than even Mimosa when it came to examining her raw materials (me) and picking out a gown. It would be a waste not to emphasize my youth? That thought never occurred to me.

"Since the event today will be held in a banquet hall, you won't need to worry about sun exposure, so why don't we try something a little daring and show some décolletage? I'm certain you'll look great! The jewelry will look all the more impressive on a lower neckline."

I should have known a former lady-in-waiting would know the particulars of any function I was attending!

Stellaria then went into my dressing room, quickly found the gown she was talking about, and brought it out to show me. She really *didn't* waste any time! She had everything laid out and ready so quickly that I couldn't get a word in edgewise and could only pout petulantly. It was, in a word, astonishing.

Dahlia, for her part, had been watching Stellaria work in silence—perhaps with a small sense of competition, waiting to see what her daughter could do.

"So what do you think of this navy gown, Madam? It shows a bit of cleavage, but since your necklace is rather large, I don't think you'll feel too exposed. Oh, also, since it will offer a little *push*, you'll be wearing your corset a bit tight, so please do bear with it."

Seeing the efficiency with which Stellaria prepared my gown and jewelry, I got the sense that she could truly give Mimosa a run for her money. The gown was just a tad flashy in terms of its cut and it certainly did display the décolletage,

both of which provided the outfit with a slight air of daring. *She mentioned lacing my corset tighter to give me a push... I guess she meant that it'll add some volume to my flat chest! She conveyed her message very well, even without saying it directly! I suppose I owe it to her to put up with it, then...*

“Your skin is just so beautiful, Madam! It looks so supple and soft. You take excellent care of it!”

Even the massage she gave me before she applied my makeup made it clear she was something of a prodigy. Her touch banished my morning pallor and made my skin feel nice and elastic. *Bravo!* I was grateful for her compliments on my skin, too, but that was all the result of Mimosa and her squad’s hard work.

“I’ll give your hair just a light combing today, since we are short on time,” Stellaria said briskly, gazing at my hair in admiration. “Please change into this.” And just like that, I was almost ready for breakfast.

How the heck is she this efficient? When she’s quiet she seems like a laid-back beauty like Cartham, but once she starts moving and talking... boy is she ever an exercise in promptness! Mother’s gathering up my discarded night clothes and quickly putting them away, while daughter moves just as quickly to get me dressed.

Once the groundwork, you could say, was mostly laid, she ran the comb easily through my hair and dressed me in one of my usual dresses. *But wait—this is a normal dress. Aren’t I getting ready to go out?* I thought to myself.

“Um, what...?” I started to say to Stellaria, only for both her and Dahlia to react to my voice at exactly the same time. *They’re almost terrifyingly in sync! It’s basically like I have two Dahlias! How can this be?* I couldn’t hold back a subtle shiver.

“Er, Stellaria? I’m sorry, but, is this what I should be wearing right now? Shouldn’t I be in my gown?” I asked her again.

“We’ll put your gown on and do your makeup after breakfast. We’re going to knock Master off his feet with your magnificent transformation! Teehee!” Stellaria tittered, her eyes gleaming playfully as she apparently changed gears from efficiency to rascal mode.

She definitely did not inherit that trait from Dahlia. Yup, she's got Cartham's blood running through her veins, that's for sure. ...She's a perfect combination of both parents.

2 — Surprising Mr. Fisalis

With my transformation delayed, I headed to the dining room dressed in some of my regular clothes. Stellaria said we would be saving Mr. Fisalis' surprise for later.

This was to be my first breakfast with Mr. Fisalis in a long time. In typical me fashion, I was nearly moved to tears at the thought of a Not Alone Breakfast!

Breakfast with him used to be pure torture, so I guess it's progress that I'm actually looking forward to it now! This is what progress looks like, right?

Anyway.

When I walked into the dining room, actually a little excited for once, I saw that Mr. Fisalis was already there reading through some paperwork. He was stylishly dressed in his sleek white uniform slacks and gray shirt, leaning casually back in his chair with his legs crossed. It had been so long since I'd seen him sitting like that.

When he saw me enter the room, he tossed the papers he was holding onto the table and said, "Good morning, Viola," with a positively invigorating smile.

Ahh, what a sight to see first thing in the morning. It's been so long since I've laid eyes on his radiance that it's entirely too much to handle this early. I'm, like, actually blinded.

My chest felt tight at the thought of finally eating with company, even as I weakly blinked under the brilliant strength of my husband's radiance.

I don't have to eat by myself anymore, yay! Just that has got me even more excited.

"Good morning," I replied to him. "Did you sleep well last night?" I asked, taking my seat, which Rohtas had kindly pulled out for me.

He had to have gotten up earlier than usual if he was already dressed and waiting for me. Before, he used to sleep in whenever he got back from long

business trips.

Mr. Fisalis smiled again at my question.

“I sure did—finally back in my own bed. All my weariness just melted away. What comforts me the most, though, no matter where I go, is knowing that you’re looking after the manor while I’m away. Thank you for that.”

“Huh? ...N-No, it’s no problem at all!” I was so caught off guard by what he said, and with such a clear, fresh smile, too, that I did a double take.

Did... did he just say “thank you?” No. Way. He actually thanked me! ...I’m flabbergasted.

It was really one shock after another that morning.

He’s never done that before, right!?

I was frozen on the spot, never having in a million years foreseen Mr. Fisalis uttering a word of thanks. My eyes must have looked like they were about to fall out of their sockets.

Mr. Fisalis stared curiously at my odd behavior.

“Viola? Aren’t you going to sit down and eat? You’ve still got quite a bit of getting ready to do after breakfast, don’t you? You’ll faint if you don’t eat enough. You eat like a bird as it is.”

Oh, he’s right. In my shock, I stood up halfway out of my chair. ...Whoopsie. I know you only said that because you’re worried about me, but I’m only like this because I’m worried about you! But nothing could make me say that out loud, of course.

Either way, Mr. Fisalis sure has been acting strangely since he came home. He dutifully went to the work function at the royal court, and then listened to what I told him to do without arguing... I mean, those are all normal adult things, but they’re not normal at all for him!

But maybe it’s not so strange after all. It’s good that he’s doing it, but it’s certainly different from how he usually is... so maybe I’m the one being weird now.

“Ah, er, I guess I do.” After a round of rapid blinking, I was finally able to move

again.

I still have to get my makeup done right after this, so this is no time to be absentminded! And I'll just act like I didn't catch his comment about my eating habits. I'm not actually a light eater, by the way, I just avoid lavish meals. Wish I could scream that back at him, but alas.

At last, Mr. Fisalis called for breakfast to begin and our food was brought in.

Rohtas informed us of the day's schedule as we scarfed down Cartham's special deluxe breakfast; it tasted like it was made with even more passion than he'd ever put into it before.

"Today's repatriation ceremony will be held in a banquet hall at the Royal Palace. There will be a banquet for the recognition of services afterward."

Seems like he's doing this to save time. Farewell to the carefree, leisurely days I used to enjoy. What's more, the royal function later today is still looming in the distance. I'm even more reluctant to go to this than those soirees.

"Got it."

"Mmhmm," Mr. Fisalis and I each confirmed as we chewed.

Rohtas continued on once he saw that we understood.

"Master will be seated at a table with the rest of the chivalric order, at a different table than Madam. Madam, please sit with the former Duke and Duchess Fisalis at the tables reserved for nobles."

"Yes, please sit with Mother and Father during the ceremony, since I won't be able to," Mr. Fisalis added.

"Okay, I'll be sure to sit there. Mother Fisalis will be there, and she's very reassuring."

Only Father Fisalis attended the previous ceremony, but I'm looking forward to Mother Fisalis going, too, this time! She's a great source of information—everything from wifely intuition to socializing advice.

I felt a bit better knowing she'd be there.

"The banquet afterward will also serve as a luncheon meeting. It will be

similar to the rally the other month. However, attendance at the banquet is rather more limited, so it is unlikely that what happened last time will happen there,” Rohtas said matter-of-factly as he looked at me, then at Mr. Fisalis, who had gone back to perusing his documents.

He must mean the unwanted flirting. I don't know how Rohtas found out about that, but regardless of how, it looks like he knows exactly what happened now. He has an incredible information network. It might even be broader than Mr. Fisalis'.

“Yeah. I'll show those bastards the door myself,” Mr. Fisalis said with frightening indifference.

Hold up—you were on the frontlines when I went to the rally. You're not supposed to know about the flirting scandal. I hope the dark look in his eyes and ominous laughter is only my imagination!

“Naturally, my lord. Pests must be exterminated,” Rohtas nodded with a grin.

Eep, the creepy smiling has spread to Rohtas!

“Of course!” replied Mr. Fisalis.

A bad feeling came over me and I suddenly turned around to see Dahlia and Stellaria wearing the same dark smiles.

W-What's gotten into everyone? What's going on!? I mean, yes, being surrounded by a group of strange men wasn't fun, but still!

“I—Is there maybe a more peaceful solution...?” I asked, finally mustering the courage to speak up.

When breakfast was done, I headed back to my room to get ready.

“Wow! I never would have thought of those!” praised Mimosa when she saw Stellaria's choice of gown and matching accessories for me.

“Mmhmm, it's important to leave your comfort zone sometimes,” I explained as Stellaria dressed me like a china doll.

Mimosa had come to observe Stellaria's skills, and she seemed quite impressed. Studious Mimosa and teacher-like Stellaria made for a particularly heartwarming image together.

“So you two know each other?” I asked Mimosa, looking over to where she was sitting on the sofa as Stellaria dressed me in my gown.

“Yes! Stellaria was one year above me in vocational school. There wasn’t a single person there who didn’t know who she was—not just because she was the daughter of the legendary Dahlia, but also because Stellaria herself was perfect in every way,” she told me, as she absentmindedly recalled her school days. Mimosa’s opinion of Stellaria had clearly developed into one of deep admiration.

Looking away from Mimosa, Stellaria said, “Mimosa was famous at school for being an outstanding junior. And now that we’re on the topic, you used to say back then that you wanted to work at the Fisalis manor, didn’t you?” She smiled gently as she laced my corset up tightly.

No one would suspect someone with such a calming laugh would have such strong arm and grip strength!

The cute golden ribbon on the corset was surprisingly robust, and in mere seconds my flat chest was pushed up and together. I couldn’t have been happier with the results.

The other flat-chested girls are bound to be lonely now that I’ve got some volume for today! Urgh, but I feel like my guts are being squeezed out...!

The dress itself was navy blue with gold accents, and it was styled with an overdress made from lace of the same hue that elegantly and lightly fanned out around me. The fluffy white petticoat peeking out from under the whole ensemble gave it all a touch of romanticism.

Naturally, my outfit perfectly matched Mr. Fisalis’ uniform. While it didn’t exactly live up to my motto of “simple is best,” it also didn’t stray far from my preferred neat and tidy look. Since Mimosa’s selections were, if anything, extremely reserved, this outfit certainly felt different.

“Just what I would expect of you, Miss Stellaria! This has been quite the learning experience for me,” Mimosa said, gazing at Stellaria so intently that it was a wonder she hadn’t been taking notes.

“Mimosa, please don’t call me Miss in Madam’s presence,” Stellaria gently

warned her.

She really knows her stuff, but I can't tell if it's because Dahlia is her mother or because she used to be a lady-in-waiting to the queen. Mimosa's never made a mistake like that before under normal circumstances, but now that her idol is here and showing her own skills, she must be a little scatterbrained. I for one have probably committed every social faux pas in the book, so I should stick up for her.

"Oh, I don't mind if she does that when I'm around. Mimosa's just nervous being around someone she looks up to."

"You read me like a book, Madam; that's exactly how I feel. I apologize for the blunder."

"In that case, you don't need to worry about it either, Stellaria. We don't have the time to be perfectly proper—we've got to hurry."

"That's right. Pick up the pace, Stellaria," Dahlia agreed, breaking her silence as she polished my jewelry.

"My apologies. As you wish, Madam." And like that, Stellaria was back in maid mode.

And with that, she briskly finished getting me ready for the ceremony.

I'd finished preparing myself—now perfectly coordinated with Mr. Fisalis and quite pleased about it—and had just left my room to go to the entryway, when I unexpectedly ran into the man in question. Dressed in his uniform jacket, the two of us were a matched set.

"You've done it again...! You look so different than usual—and so lovely!" Mr. Fisalis gazed at me in wonder, even though I was only dolled up a bit more than normal.

"I look a little different than how I usually do, since Stellaria here helped me get ready instead of Mimosa," I said, motioning to Stellaria, who was standing behind me.

"Stellaria? Is that a new maid?"

Seeing that he replied with a question, I can assume Rohtas never filled him in. Rohtas has sole control over hiring new servants, partly because Mr. Fisalis has always shirked his duties as duke. So, that's partially to blame, but Mr. Fisalis couldn't have known about her at all, since Stellaria was hired under special circumstances by Rohtas and Dahlia while he was at the front. That explains why he doesn't know about her. This is the guy who didn't know Cartham and Dahlia were married, either, so it's understandable that he wouldn't know they have a daughter.

But on the other hand, maybe Dahlia kept Stellaria completely out of sight and so, despite living in the same house, he never once met her. Another sign of her professionalism.

"Yes. She's Cartham and Dahlia's daughter! She was a lady-in-waiting for the queen at the Royal Palace, but she'll be helping me for a little while since Mimosa is pregnant," I took the opportunity to explain, since Rohtas had not.

Mr. Fisalis stared at both Dahlia and Stellaria behind me with a look of confusion so obvious, I could very nearly see question marks swirling around his head.

"Dahlia and Cartham's daughter? A lady-in-waiting? Mimosa's pregnant?" The questions just spilled out of him, true to character. His usually-smiling mouth gaped in confusion.

"That's right, Mimosa is pregnant. We all found out while you were deployed. She can't overexert herself, so we brought Stellaria in. Because I wouldn't be able to leave the house without Mimosa, of course! Not that I'd mind not leaving the house! But we still needed someone, just in case, you know?"

"..."

"I told Mimosa that she could stay at the manor, but is that alright with you? She can't rest at her parents' house because they're so busy."

"..."

"Plus, if she stays here, Bellis is here too, and she wouldn't have to worry about anything happening with the other maids around to help."

"..."

“Are you listening, Mr. Fisalis?”

Even though I had just given him a thorough explanation, he only replied with a mumble while staring off into space. I strained my ears to hear him, wondering why he looked so serious.

“Mimosa is pregnant... with Bellis’ child... Damn it! They’ve beaten us to the punch...!”

That’s *what you’re thinking about right now!?*

...Forget “beating us to the punch”! It was never a competition to start with!

3 — The Repatriation Ceremony

Once Mr. Fisalis recovered from his temporary shock over Stellaria's sudden appearance and Mimosa's pregnancy, he turned to Rohtas behind him and said:

"I understand, for now. You can fill me in about her employment status later."

"Yes, sir."

"Also, I don't see a problem with treating Mimosa just as we always have. She can act as more of an advisor to Viola, rather than being completely on leave," he briskly instructed Rohtas.

"As you wish, Master."

I can't believe this! I mean, this is the same Mr. Fisalis who never had anything to do with the hiring of servants before!

Now it was my turn to freeze in disbelief. Unsurprisingly, Rohtas' own shock did not show on his face.

I think Dahlia behind me might be frozen in place, too. I hadn't turned around, but I could just feel it.

Seriously, though, what is with Mr. Fisalis all of a sudden? Ever since he got back from his campaign, he's been acting so weird— No, upright is the better term. But then again, that's weird for him.

...Ahem, where was I? Oh, yes—the surprises just kept on coming! Mr. Fisalis having a firm grasp on what's happening in his own manor is a positive development! This is an improvement! But there's still the question of whether this means he's gone crazy... I reasoned, as I stared off into space.

"Viola? What is it? We've got to get going. We're out of time."

"Oh! Yes, let's go." My body seemed to suck my soul—once again, trying to make a break for it—back inside at the sound of Mr. Fisalis' voice, as he gazed intently at me with those beautiful deep brown eyes.

"Nothing to do but get this boring ceremony over with as fast as possible," he

replied in a surprised tone, chuckling at me. At the same time, he took my hand like it was the most natural thing in the world, wrapped my arm around his, and escorted me to the door.

The repatriation ceremony was held in a banquet hall in the Royal Palace, so that's where we were shown to.

"Presenting the Duke and Duchess Fisalis, the former Minister of War, Lord Fisalis, and Lady Fisalis!" cried the chamberlain, his voice echoing through the spacious hall.

The ballroom was intended to be a multipurpose room and was frequently used to hold large-scale events, so this was my third time setting foot in there. *Being here three times isn't something to brag about! Whew, almost sounded like I was eager to climb the social ladder for a second!*

My previous visits had been lavish affairs—a wedding reception and a soiree—whereas this was a state function. The nobles were all assembled in full force, dressed to the nines, and later the brave knights would all sit in a row... it was a grand display of pomp and forma— I mean, it was a serious event.

Naturally, I was super nervous, this being my first time attending a function of this size.

"Wow, this certainly feels different from the soiree... but I guess that's to be expected from a state function."

Sensing my jitters, Mr. Fisalis agreed, "Right. But the part where we have to listen to a mind-numbing speech from His Majesty doesn't change."

"Pffft! Mr. Fisalis!" His unexpected humor helped me relax a little.

The banquet hall Mr. Fisalis escorted me into was imbued with a dignified and stately atmosphere. There wasn't a single hint of fanfare in the air—none of the usual brilliant lights or glittering dresses, no orchestra filling the room with cheery music. The closest thing to music was the low hum of hushed conversation throughout the crowd. I figured the reason all the nobles were dressed in such somber colors was to avoid drawing attention away from the many knights standing in the middle of the floor (taking up the majority of it,

really) who were all in uniform.

Turning my gaze ahead, I saw that a throne had been installed on a dais at the front of the room, beyond which the knights were gathered.

“There you are. We’re both over here, so let Cercis go and come with us.”

“Why, hello, Vi!”

“Father and Mother Fisalis, hello! Yes, coming!”

“Fare thee well for now, my dearest Vi!”

“Don’t be so dramatic, Mr. Fisalis.”

With the center of the room taken by knights standing in rows, chairs for the nobility had been set up on the floor on either side.

Phew. Looks like we’ll be able to sit down. I’ve heard that sometimes you have to stand for official functions!

Just as I suspected would happen, my in-laws and I were led to the seats closest to the throne. What’s more, we were in the front row. Being a wallflower wasn’t even an option.

I guess this rules out taking a little nap, too, huh? The best place for blending in with the crowd would probably be with my own parents. I wonder where Father is.

Starting from the throne, our seating arrangement went: Father Fisalis, me, and then Mother Fisalis. A perfect Viola sandwich.

“We will be right over there. I’m glad we won’t be too far from each other. I’ll come right over as soon as the ceremony ends, so wait here for me, won’t you Vi?” Mr. Fisalis reminded me with an indulgent smile as he let go of my hand after escorting me to my seat.

He’s going for gentle pressure with a smile now, huh?

Just as he’d said, the special ops division was directly in front of us. I hadn’t noticed until he had mentioned it, but I recognized several faces over there—Mr. Fisalis’ subordinates smiled when they caught sight of me.

Oh, Mr. Corydalis and the Bombshell Trio are here, too!

“Sure, I’ll sit and wait here for you.” *He’s acting odd again, but I don’t want to question him and cause a scene, so I’ll just wait for him to come get me,* I was thinking to myself when, off to my side, Father Fisalis said playfully:

“Just leave protecting the princess up to us!” He completed the statement with a thumbs-up. I wasn’t exactly sure what he meant.

Moments after Mr. Fisalis left the nobles’ seating area to go and stand with his subordinates, the chamberlain’s voice rang through the vast room with a cry of, “Hear ye, announcing the arrival of His Majesty the King!” as a heavy door opened solemnly.

This means that the ceremony is finally about to start. Eeek, I’m nervous again!

The king took his seat on the throne, the queen at his side, followed by the prince and the rest of the royal family making their entrance and settling into their own places. The king was wearing a magnificent cloak that flowed behind him. The king and queen were both wearing their crowns, which were national treasures and only brought out on special occasions. It was my first time seeing them dressed in all their finery, and it seemed very dignified indeed.

The mere arrival of the king and queen brought instant silence to the room that was previously humming with conversation.

Once all the royals had assembled, the king suddenly stood and proclaimed, “Let us begin the repatriation ceremony. Our army fought valiantly in this war and guided us to victory. Therefore...” his sonorous voice marking the start of the ceremony.

But.

Boy, was it a long speech.

Unusually long.

Now that I think of it, his toast at our wedding was really long, too. His Highness must really like to talk! But then again, even if I try to make it more exciting in my head, it’s not going to get any shorter or less boring. Oopsie, did I just say that☆

The king's remarks, which were supposed to segue into the start of the ceremony, have somehow veered off course to the founding of the kingdom. What do the legendary heroes have to do with this? Oh, I guess they were important, too, okay, yes, sure.

“Our founding fathers gained the upper hand in that difficult and terrible war, and over the many years since the Flür Kingdom was thence founded...”

Erm, am I the only one thinking that he should be praising the heroes sitting right here rather than the heroes from the legends?

“...And thus our noble kingdom has expanded. All, made possible by these modern day legendary heroes...”

Just how long is he going to go on? The nobles outside his line of sight are definitely asleep. Some with their eyes still open, maybe. You know, I sort of wish I had that talent. Sure, I get to sit down, but Mr. Fisalis and the other knights all have to stay standing while they listen. Won't they get dizzy? Nah, there's no way a knight would be that weak.

I was inconspicuously surveying the room in an effort to stay awake, but eventually I got curious and my gaze landed on Mr. Fisalis. He was standing perfectly still and listening to the king's speech with a serious and dignified expression.

Wow, I've got to give him points for that! He's usually smiling cheerily, but it makes sense that he wouldn't act like that now.

His mouth was wearing not its normal gentle smile, but was pursed tightly as his dark brown eyes stared sharply ahead.

His entire presence is different. Is this what they call being in “work mode?”

What the lady knights said about him being able to do his job well rang true that day.

With all the knights dressed to the nines in their uniforms, their cool factor is sky-high, too. Mr. Fisalis certainly lives up to his reputation among the ladies in high society! And he's not the only one, either. Both Corydalis to his side and the two subordinates behind them are usually laidback jokesters, but today, at least, they're standing at attention and listening. How admirable! ...Am I the only one

not taking this seriously? Upon reflection, I think I'll pay more attention, too.

But no sooner had I stopped surveying the crowd than I was overwhelmed by a tidal wave of sleepiness! I took back what I said, realizing right then that paying attention just wasn't going to happen.

I've got to do my best to stay awake!

"We will now acknowledge those who achieved great honor in this war..." Long, long after the ceremony had officially commenced, we finally reached the awards stage.

Jeez Louise, I was beginning to wonder if I'd fall asleep with my eyes open. I wonder if the prime minister or someone will make a script for next time. Gosh, I hope so.

Anyway.

All the same, the key figures who led us to victory have got to be the special ops division led by Mr. Fisalis. It was the regular soldiers who actually did the fighting, but they only went out once Mr. Fisalis and the others had set everything up. So really, we owe our victory to the special ops division for carefully laying all the groundwork! Am I just playing favorites, though? Nah, I can't be. I'm sure everyone else would agree.

And so it seemed when the king continued to, "The most distinguished of those being the special operations division, whom I ask now to come forward."

"Yes, Your Highness!" the division members all replied before taking a single flawlessly-synchronized step forward.

The king nodded in satisfaction at this before continuing.

"It is no exaggeration to say that our military's victory was made possible by the tireless preparations undertaken by this division. Well done. As an award, you shall each be promoted two ranks, and be granted fourteen days' holiday leave. Take this time to renew your strength. Let us know if there is anything else that you desire. Any request you have we shall fulfill to the best of our ability. Again, thank you for a job well done."

The end of the king's praise was met with thunderous applause. Even the

seated nobles rose for a standing ovation.

The awards, though, seem a little too generous. Promotions of a single rank are pretty common awards, but two whole ranks is very rare. And then two weeks of vacation on top of that... That means Mr. Fisalis will be at home for a lengthy period of time. I'm just worried about how I'll fill the time. ...Er, no I'm not! That's not a problem at all!

And then, on top of that, they can request more things, too! What a lavish reward! But I guess it's all to recognize their hard work.

Mr. Fisalis stepped forward toward the king to receive what I assumed was a certificate.

What is that?

It was my first time at such an event, so I did not know what the paper was for. As inconspicuous as I tried to be when I tilted my head, Father Fisalis must have noticed, because he whispered in my ear, "That's a royal decree recording all the awards mentioned."

Thanks for having my back, Father Fisalis!

I stood up, too, and applauded liberally. Mr. Fisalis went back to where the rest of his division was with the decree, and then all of them returned to where they had been standing before they'd been called. When they were all settled, the ceremony progressed to the next award for another unit. The king took the award from the prime minister and called the unit in a clear voice.

"This award goes to the First Cavalry Company, who put forth the most effort in combat. First Cavalry Company, please come forward."

"Yes, sir!" they replied when the king called them.

Makes sense that you'd have to give some praise to the people who actually participated in combat.

The ones who came forward were not from Mr. Fisalis' unit, but knights wearing deep green uniforms.

Is it just my imagination, or are their uniforms wrinkled and worn compared to the special ops unit's? I mean, they look disheveled. Rather, their uniforms fit

just fine, it's just the overall look... Er, what am I saying? They must be utterly exhausted. After all, combat is a real test of one's strength and stamina!

And as you would expect from those on the front lines, if you look closely, each and every one of them appears to be injured. None of them seem badly injured, but they've got gauze and bandages everywhere. That must be why they look disheveled!

Even their faces, as handsome as they are, are covered in cuts and scratches. That just goes to show what a terrible battle they managed to get through! They really must have worked their butts off!

The king looked at them with an expression of pity and a weak smile for a split second before he expressed his praise.

Hm? What was that look for? Oh well, probably nothing.

"I received word that the highly dangerous mission undertaken by the gentleman leading your charge was successful. I have also heard that the battle was uncommonly difficult. However, I believe it is thanks to your heroic determination that we prevailed. You did well, men. I grant you all promotions of one rank and ten days of time off as an award."

The crowd broke out into applause after the king had finished this proclamation, too.

I see... they went out on some kind of dangerous, daredevil mission. That certainly does explain why they are that disheveled and beaten up! I hope they use those days off to give their wounds sufficient time to heal.

As I was thinking, eyes glazing over as I stared at nothing in particular, I unexpectedly met eyes with the tall, slim, blond knight taking the decree from the king. He must have noticed because his eyes widened ever so slightly as he looked back at me—and what beautiful blue eyes they were! He had nicely chiseled features as well, but as they were unfortunately covered with a large piece of gauze, I could not help but feel a little sad that such beauty had been ruined. Since he had gotten that injury in war, I bet the husband-hunting ladies wouldn't want anything to do with him anymore.

I smiled wholeheartedly at him in thanks for fighting for our kingdom, but he

flinched and drew back before looking away.

What was that for? Didn't he like my twenty-dollar smile? Hmph.

4 — After the Repatriation Ceremony

Once the awards for the special ops division and frontline soldiers—er, I had already forgotten the name of the soldiers' unit, but whatever—had been given out, there were no more awards special enough to be presented by the king. It all just felt like a bunch of directives to give such and such award to so-and-so.

Hold on, is this supposed to represent what grade they got— Er, rather, how much they contributed, I wondered while the awards were being announced.

“How are these awards determined?” I whispered to my father-in-law next to me, puzzled.

“They’re based on one’s level of contribution to military strategy or battle. Usually it’s the operation headquarters who knows who’s doing what. And then that information, along with the battle reports, are presented to the war council at the Royal Palace,” he whispered back.

“Oh, I see.”

That must have been why the lady knights were constantly going back and forth between the palace and the frontlines.

I was following along with the seemingly infinite list of awards, feeling grateful and amazed at how many people had been serving on the front lines, when suddenly the awards came to a close with the king saying, “...and so, this concludes our repatriation ceremony.” I had to wonder if the prime minister finally gave the signal to wrap it up so we could move along to the next event.

I was, quite frankly, relieved, because after all the time that had passed since the start of the ceremony, my desire to listen to even one more droning speech had been reduced to zero. I wanted to conserve any remaining energy for the socializing to come.

No sooner had the royalty momentarily left their seats than a feeling of relaxation swept over the silent hall in the blink of an eye and the place returned to its earlier hum of noise and activity.

“Phew, it’s finally over.” I felt a burst of energy I didn’t know I still had left, and nonchalantly rolled my neck from side to side to loosen my cramped muscles.

“All that’s left is the luncheon meeting now. You just have to hang on a little while longer, Vi!” chuckled Lady Fisalis. I snapped out of my pleasant bone-cracking daze at the sound of her voice.

The luncheon meeting! That’s the other part of the ceremony that Rohtas mentioned this morning!

Royal food = lavish food.

Oh nooo, will I be okay? Getting fancy food poisoning like I did at the manor in the presence of all these people is a serious concern! Gosh, I hope people can’t tell what I’m thinking.

Alas, it must have, in fact, been very clear what I was thinking, because then Mother Fisalis asked, “What’s wrong, dear?”

“Oh! Uh, n-nothing at all! Ah ha ha ha!” I replied, more than a little panicked. Mother Fisalis just looked at me with a dubious expression.

Oh no. Is this the end for me? I bet what they serve at the palace is just as, if not more, rich and luxurious than at the manor... I can just picture it: me, writhing in gastrointestinal pain several hours from now...! Nooo!

The scene I’d inevitably cause when I’m ruthlessly felled by my weak stomach would be humiliating—to say nothing of (again, like last time) the unjustified, suspicious looks that the poor cook would get. What should I do?

...Hold on a sec. Calm down.

Now that I’ve given it some thought, Dahlia didn’t give me any of that medicine this morning to bring—that digestive aid for indigestion that Mr. Fisalis brought from the royal family’s medicinal garden when I got sick at the manor.

I drank some beforehand and she gave me more to take with me when I went on that stroll around the capital with Mr. Fisalis, too, but she didn’t tell me to drink some before I left this time, did she? Dahlia wouldn’t forget something like

that, so did she know something I don't? I've got to find out for sure!

I gently clenched my fist, psyching myself up.

"Um, excuse me, Mother Fisalis?" I asked,

"Yes? Goodness, is something the matter, Vi? You look ready for battle yourself." Lady Fisalis seemed puzzled.

This is kind of important, no, very important, so yes, I'm charged up, but please don't mind that.

As she gazed at me with those beautiful sapphire blue eyes, filled with even more energy than I was channeling into my fist, I inquired further into the matter. I was hoping to confirm what I had realized a moment earlier. "Will the luncheon meeting be formal, seated dining?"

If it's seated dining, I'll be served a full course, i.e. a straight path to stomach pain, since I'll have nowhere to run. No matter how big this banquet hall is, when you consider how many people are here, space is actually limited. Assuming they put out chairs at tables for precisely the number of people expected to come, it'd be a travesty if someone (probably the lowest ranking knights) had to eat in the hallway.

Lady Fisalis replied to me kindly, fending off my ghastly gaze with a pretty smile, "No. With this many people, that would be quite the challenge, so it will be buffet style. Soon they'll be setting up some tables where we were seated."

Hallelujah, a buffet! I'll be able to choose what I eat, so I won't need to fear gastrointestinal terrorism! Yippee!

I finally unclenched my fist and sighed in relief.

Haaah. I'm just going to take a moment to breathe.

"Oh, really! I had a big breakfast, you see, so I'm not all that hungry. I was worried I'd be served a full course meal and have to clean my plate. It feels like a weight has been lifted from my shoulders, hearing that the luncheon meeting will be buffet style," I said, letting a little white lie slide past my lips.

Then again, considering the pressure in my corset is just this side of painful after Stellaria laced me up, it wasn't a complete lie.

No sooner had I sighed in relief at my escape from another fancy food poisoning experience than Mr. Fisalis arrived with his subordinates in tow. Looking closely at him, I noticed he was wearing a rather sour expression.

What could that be about? When I looked behind him, Corydalis and the others all looked to be in a good mood. Judging by their faces, they're having fun following their beloved commander around. I bet their conversation went like, "We all wanna go with you," "No, stop acting clingy," "Aww, don't say such mean things!" Mr. Fisalis ought to know that they only do all that because they love him!

Everyone seemed to have tossed aside their dignified expressions like masks after the ceremony and were now back to their usual laidback appearance.

"Hello, Madam!"

"The ceremony was so long! You weren't bored, were you?"

"I know I sure felt like I lost consciousness halfway through!"

"Same here, dude!"

"You guys are sorry excuses for knights! We ought to go for some training after this. I'll knock some sense into your lazy minds and bodies!"

"Please forgive us, ma'am!" the men cried in fear.

And just like that, I was surrounded, and the usual squeezes and hugs began.

"Don't crowd Viola like that, guys! Hey, I'm talking to you! Wha— Hey!" Last I checked, Mr. Fisalis had been standing next to me, but all of a sudden he was swept away by the mini mob forming around me.

...Hmm, he's gotten pretty used to this scenario. Normally, he'd nearly blow a gasket and step in to help, but for some reason he's just watching with a warm smile today. Oh... that must be why. He's probably just glad to see his underlings home safe and joking around like this.

And it was with said warm feelings that he barked, "You animals! Did you just shove me away when I told you not to crowd Viola!?" It seemed he'd reached the limits of his tolerance when he was ejected from the circle.

Hmm, I don't think that vein I see on his forehead is just a trick of the light.

His subordinates yelled (mostly the men), flinching so hard that their feet left the ground before freezing in place.

Mr. Fisalis took that opportunity to return to my side, telling me, “You must be tired after that boring ceremony, Vi. And then these buffoons followed me over and... grrr.” He forcefully pulled me under his arm and away from the other knights.

Ah ha, this hasn't changed at all, either! What a relief to see him acting like his old self instead of all weird and serious— Uh, ahem, I mean, mature.

I smiled comfortingly, hoping to sooth him after seeing his peers apathetically boot him out of the circle.

“Not at all. I was sitting down, so I'm just fine. Didn't you all have to stand the entire time? You're the ones who must be tired.”

“We're used to it, so it wasn't a big deal.”

“But didn't one of you say you almost lost consciousness...” I said, casting the other knights a sidelong glance, at which point most of them (minus the lady knights) dropped their own gazes to the floor.

“Corydalis. Looks like these buffoons need to be whipped into shape...” Mr. Fisalis said, giving his subordinates a steely glare.

“Roger that!” Corydalis replied with a smile that spanned his whole face and a big thumbs-up.

“Aaaaahhh! Noooooo!”

What a wonderful, albeit terrifying, smile Corydalis is wearing! He really must be enjoying himself.

Each and every one of the members of the special ops division (except the women, of course) were shaking in their boots.

Am I the only one yet again pleased as punch by his superb communication skills?

I was busy smiling at the male knights while the lady knights all jabbed at them with their elbows. Then, Mr. Fisalis broke his silence with a sudden, “Vi?”

“What is it, Mr. Fisalis?”

“What’s so amusing?”

“Amusing?”

“Yeah. Your face says you’re amused.”

Well, I definitely was enjoying the back-and-forth between his subordinates, so I guess it showed!

“I’m just really happy to see everyone back in one piece!”

“Oh, really?” Mr. Fisalis smiled at my reply.

Ah, his sparkle hasn’t gone anywhere, I see.

Everyone in the special ops division came back in much the same shape that they’d left in, but I realized that the knights from the frontline unit who’d received an award were all riddled with injuries.

“Oh, but, even though you all made it back uninjured, a lot of the frontline troops were pretty badly hurt, right? Um, I forget which ones they were, but they received an award right after you...” The unit’s name had utterly vanished from my mind—not surprising, considering how little I knew or cared about military jargon—but I still pretended to try and remember for a second.

“The First Cavalry Company?” Corydalis kindly offered.

“Ah, yes. I think that sounds right!”

“You *think* it sounds right...” he repeated, wobbling in what was either surprise or exasperation. Either way, I just ignored it.

“The cavalry sure did contribute a lot to this war. And they did have a lot of injuries, yes. They must have been following a really brutal strategy, but I’m glad injuries are all they’ve got. What kind of operation caused them to get hurt like that, I wonder. I think they call that a ‘suicide mission,’ but then again, I’m not really great with military terms.”

All the knights snorted as if they were just barely holding back laughter.

Did I say something strange? It was obvious I had missed some sort of memo, but all I could do was stare blankly as they all exploded with laughter.

“That’s the reason the war turned out the way it did.”

“No, no, it was the genius strategizing!” the knights said, some time after they stopped laughing.

Apparently, the enemy had built their encampment with its back to a sheer cliff to try to fortify their rear defense. The cliff face was nearly a straight drop down, making attacks from the rear absolutely impossible.

But.

If the rear wasn’t an option, what about from above? An image of Mr. Fisalis, just after he finished hearing a recon report, flashed through my mind. A so-called downhill rush.

“The area in front of the encampment was level, with an unobstructed line of sight—meaning there was no place to hide, so it wasn’t suited for a surprise attack.”

“Obviously. It would have been supremely stupid to charge them head on,” Mr. Fisalis flatly told Corydalís.

I’m sure Mr. Fisalis is right, but did he have to say it in that arrogant tone of voice?

“But the point is that it was a plunge straight down! They rode their horses down an almost ninety-degree incline. That would have been incredibly dangerous! But I mean, if anyone could have done it, it would be the cavalry. But still.” Mr. Fisalis’ subordinates shivered in fright as they recollected the operation.

“You seem to forget that battlefield operations are always dangerous. Besides, they were all too happy to ride down that cliff!”

“Of course! They’re a cavalry unit, aren’t they? They showed good results from their daily training, right?”

“No, they were still idiots. They were yelling ‘yeehaw’ as they went down the hill, if I recall.” The lady knights laughed shrilly.

I... I don’t think that’s something you ought to laugh about...

“...Was I the only one who thought that was a vicious warcry, then?” Corydalís

muttered, his voice drowned out by the lady knights' raucous cackling.

Off to the side, the other knights who must have actually seen the sight in question grumbled wearily.

"It was hard enough on us, just having to scope the place out..."

"For sure."

"There were so many bugs. I didn't get hurt, but I was basically one big mosquito bite by the time I got back."

"I feel itchy just remembering it."

"We didn't go all the way to the drop off, but we followed the same road part of the way there."

"We shouldn't have had to do all that. We're the brains of this operation..."

"Yeah, don't send us with the grunts!"

Just what sort of hellish battle plan did you come up with, Mr. Fisalis!? I thought, flashing him some extreme side eye.

"I thought the plan was well suited to them—they're the cavalry, after all. The war was settled quickly, thanks to that. No, I mean, thanks to the cavalry! I mean it!" I said, to the delight of the knights, who smiled back at me.

But wait, is it just me, or do their smiles seem a little dark?

5 — An Unexpected Person

“Oh, that reminds me. There’s something I need to tell you here,” Mr. Fisalis said, retracting his dark smile and replacing it with a serious look.

It must be terribly important for him to look so serious all of a sudden. But “here” is a banquet hall at the Royal Palace! I can’t say this is an appropriate place to have an important discussion.

But then I realized exactly where *specifically* we were.

Ah ha. We’re in the most exclusive seats here. No one’s going to come over and bother us. In fact, the other seats are basically arranged around us quite a distance away. It seems like my in-laws have wandered off somewhere, and the only people nearby are Mr. Fisalis’ subordinates. There are nobles and knights seated a little ways away, but there’s a decent amount of background noise from everyone talking among themselves, so maybe no one would hear what we’re saying over here. They don’t even seem to notice that we’re here.

Well, if Mr. Fisalis and the others have determined that it’s okay to talk about something important here, I guess I’m fine with that. I’ll just go along with it.

“What is it you want to tell me? And that you have to tell me here?” I cocked my head in confusion, having no idea whatsoever what they wanted to talk about, completely surrounding me as they were.

“It has to do with the war. It’s something I want to tell you myself, so the facts don’t get twisted like last time with the mistress scandal.”

“Ohhh. That *did* happen, didn’t it?” As I said it, I spotted Angelica, the lady knight with silver hair who had been mistaken for Mr. Fisalis’ mistress. She noticed me looking at her and gave me a nod and big smile. She was wearing her usual knight’s uniform today, but I couldn’t stop myself from remembering how beautiful she had looked in women’s clothes back then, too.

My apologies. I’m getting off track, again.

“Exactly! If you misunderstand even one single detail, I’ll be back in the

doghouse with you thinking I'm unfaithful! I'd like to avoid that outcome!" Mr. Fisalis contended with a sour look.

Okay, okay. No need to get so worked up.

"I see. What is it you've done this time?"

"...Why do I get the impression that you thought I was going to admit I was cheating or something?"

"Well, your impression was incorrect. So what is it you need to tell me?" I pressed, looking him in the eyes.

In all honesty, though... I kind of did. What did you expect me to think, sitting me down to "talk" like this?

"...Right. Our informant for this war was actually Calendula." He spoke her name like it pained him a little.

"Oh! Your ex-girlfriend?" It had been so long since I'd heard that name that I stared at him in surprise.

I never expected to hear her name come up now!

"Yes. Is it alright if I continue?"

"Of course."

He was trying to gauge my feelings just now, but what's there for him to feel guilty about?

He continued on once he saw that he had my permission. He lowered his voice, taking our surroundings into account.

"Callie had been traveling all over since she left the manor and ultimately ended up in Aurantia. She was dancing at a tavern there like she used to, and apparently the second prince of Aurantia was a regular patron there."

"And this second prince also happens to be an important figure in the Aurantian military," Corydalis chimed in.



Mr. Fisalis and Corydalis gave me a helpful explanation of the situation in Aurantia. Allow me to summarize what the two of them told me.

The second prince had been regularly going to see Miss Calendula. She'd managed to get a *prince* to fall for her. No surprise there!

And despite this prince being at the tippy top of the Aurantian military, he blabbed all sorts of important information to her. What caught her attention was when he mentioned something along the lines of, "I'm thinking of invading the Flür Kingdom and swiping their natural resources."

Naturally, she assumed that he was lying, given how he decided to just up and tell her classified information, but she was shocked into taking him seriously when he started to talk about specific preparations for war. She also said that in that moment she realized he must be some sort of idiot, which sounded like classic Miss Calendula. On that note, it seems the thought that she was a spy never even crossed his mind. How naive can you get? Miss Calendula wasn't officially a spy, though.

According to what Mr. Fisalis and Lord Fisalis told me as well, Aurantia wasn't exactly a kingdom that made bright decisions when it came to war. They found something to complain about, or some problem with another country, and picked a fight over it.

Even still, that prince should have known better than to reveal secret information to a woman he met at a tavern. Sounds like he was seriously lacking in self-awareness. Your military's in trouble if that's what the guys at the top are doing! Even someone like me, who didn't know anything about war or strategizing, understood *that*.

But that's enough about that topic.

Miss Calendula secretly informed the special ops division of all this because she actually cared a lot about the Flür kingdom that she'd called home for so long and liked Mr. Fisalis better than this second prince she had only met on a few occasions. Mr. Fisalis' division began to plan their move around this time, since Aurantia's shady activities was making waves even as far away as Flür. It was during those intelligence assessments that Mr. Fisalis met with Miss Calendula several times. That was likely the misunderstanding he was referring

to earlier; he didn't want me to think that he had been seeing a girlfriend he was supposed to be over.

"So it was one-hundred percent *work-related!*" he said, careful to emphasize 'work related' and even going so far as to clench his fist.

"Don't worry, I understand."

As surprised as I am to be hearing about Miss Calendula here and now, I'm glad she seems to be doing well, based on what Mr. Fisalis is telling me. So she still cares about Mr. Fisalis, even though she had to leave the manor after I showed up...

"I want to be clear, whatever lingering attachment she may have for me is *nothing* like what we have now, though!" Mr. Fisalis declared in a single breath, as if he had read my mind, all the while looking me in the eye.

Huh? Did I say what I was thinking out loud?

"Oh, haha, please."

"You were there back then, you heard it all, too! I completely broke things off with her!"

"Oh, you mean when she said 'I'm all too happy to give you away to your wife, you pathetic man'?" I recalled him saying something else, too, during their showdown, and mumbled to myself trying to remember exactly what it was.

Oh well, that was such a long time ago.

Mr. Fisalis must have still heard what I said because he began to choke, clawing at his chest with a pained expression.

Sorry! I didn't mean to reopen an old wound!

"Oh, Commander..." Corydalis *tsked*, looking at him with a sad smile as he all but fell out of his chair.

"...Er, yes, anyway. So, Calendula was passing along information she heard from the second prince, but since I swore I'd never do anything that would make you distrust me, I just wanted to tell you that we were never alone together, even once," Mr. Fisalis said, a little teary-eyed, once he'd gathered his wits while I stroked his back.

“What do you mean?” I cocked my head, not quite understanding what he meant.

“Whenever I met up with Callie, I did so with several other people accompanying us—all disguised as customers.”

It sounds like they conducted the information exchange with her at the tavern where she worked—a quick exchange in a noisy crowd of people while pretending to be barflies. Their conversation would have been concealed by the clatter of drunken patrons eating and drinking, so a private discussion between people sitting close together would have been barely audible. Not to mention, I doubt the other people in the tavern would have even cared to eavesdrop on their conversation. Still, it seems like they did try to be careful despite that.

“Oh, so that’s how you did it.”

“Yeah. And since we thought that you might not believe us if only guys went to meet with her, I had Chamomile, Alkanna, and Angelica *dress* as men. One of them usually went with me,” Mr. Fisalis explained further, pointing to the grinning lady knights.

He made them dress up as men...! You have piqued my curiosity. Knowing the lady knights, they must have looked very handsome! ...Uh-oh, ahem. Seems like I’m letting my imagination get the better of me.

The lady knights met my eyes, which were shining in the depths of a crossdressing fantasy, and each other’s, purposefully meeting mine in a way that could only be described as fabulous.

“It’s like he said,” blonde-haired Chamomile said with a mischievous chuckle.

E-Exactly what kind of disguises were they wearing, I wonder?

“I was absolutely amazed! I was even able to make it to the door of the men’s bathroom!” Angelica said, brushing her silvery hair aside as she flashed me a wink.

It’s a good thing no one was paying close attention then... You’re lucky she wasn’t so impressed with herself that she actually went into the men’s room, Mr. Fisalis!

“There was nothing at all that you needed to worry about, Madam! Trust us!” Alkanna said with a thumbs up, her bronze-toned hair pulled back in a sleek, dignified ponytail.

And so I received three guarantees—albeit very different ones—of Mr. Fisalis’ innocence.

Unless, of course, Mr. Fisalis, this is all just a very well-constructed alibi... But for me to actually think that, two things would have to be true: 1) I am falling for Mr. Fisalis and 2) I am a deeply jealous wife who is constantly suspecting him of cheating.

On a different note, although I do get the feeling that this was just a display of Mr. Fisalis’ integrity. If all this really was just a ruse, I’d never suspect there to be a division-wide destruction of evidence!

Feeling a bit defeated, I looked up at Mr. Fisalis.

“So you had to do all that, then. I see.”

“Yes. So if more *ludicrous* rumors about me having an affair start floating around, you can just laugh them off. As far as the intel gathering goes, they don’t know who was the first to suggest what. Now that you know the truth, though, there’s no room for misunderstandings, right?” Taking my hand once more, Mr. Fisalis leaned over so he could look deeply into my eyes.

You’re crushing my hand! Ow! Loosen your grip! You really don’t need to hold on that tightly! Plus, you’re making me blush, staring right at me like that.

“Oh, I get it now. You wanted to talk here because there are witnesses—the lady knights.”

“Exactly. So is everything settled, then?”

“Yep, it’s all good with me,” I assured him with a firm nod, looking back into his gorgeous dark brown eyes.

The tension in his shoulders melted away in a split second when he saw that I understood, and he responded with one of his usual radiant smiles. It was fifty percent more lovely than his regular smile, actually.

“Oh, thank goodness,” he said with obvious relief, his smile growing broader.

“Thank goodness” is right. When he sighed, he also loosened his grip on my poor hand. I thought he’d break my fingers.

“But if it gets out that Miss Calendula was complicit in something that dangerous, will she be able to stay in Aurantia? Will she really be alright?” I asked Mr. Fisalis, suddenly worried.

Assuming she’s still down there, if anyone somehow finds out that she was doing spy stuff, won’t her life be in danger? And I only just got to hear how she was doing after so long! She seemed to be doing well, too. If she was back in the Flür Kingdom, I’d even say she deserved a medal.

“She’ll be fine. Callie was under our protection when the war broke out. While we were protecting her, we asked what she wanted to do and we were able to escort her to Flür’s ally in the east, Umber. Please don’t worry too much about her,” Mr. Fisalis told me, picking up on my anxiety.

“That’s great! I feel a lot better now.” I’d heard that, unlike Aurantia, Umber was a good, peaceful country. If they had a diplomatic relationship with Flür, they must be very safe, too. I felt reassured, knowing where Miss Calendula was and that she was safe.

“Now that your fears have been dispelled... I’ve been looking after this, Madam,” Angelica said as she handed me something. It was a plain white envelope. There was only one place to buy those in town.

I took it from her and looked on the front and the back, but there was nothing written on either side.

“What is this?”

“It’s a letter from Miss Calendula to you. She left it with the commander, but since he wanted to ensure there would be no more misunderstandings, it was then entrusted to me.”

“You don’t say! Miss Calendula wrote to me?”

“She did.”

“Thank you so much. I don’t want to make everyone wait while I read this, so I’ll look over it when I get home.”

“That sounds like a good idea,” Mr. Fisalis agreed with a nod.

I’m glad I could hear some unexpected news about an unexpected person. Oh, and I do believe that Mr. Fisalis is innocent. Everything’s a-okay!!

6 — Treasured Wife Syndrome?

Perhaps because we were giving off strong “don’t bother us” vibes while we were deep in conversation, our chairs remained in the same arrangement they had been in for the ceremony, but as soon as we were done talking, some servants appeared out of nowhere and moved our chairs for lunch at lightning speed. I was impressed both by their ability to read the room and by how fast they worked. As I watched the servants work with admiration, the royal family returned—once it seemed that the venue had been prepared for the luncheon meeting, at least.

I’d been so focused on what Mr. Fisalis and the other knights were saying that I hadn’t noticed, but when I finally did manage to look around, I realized that the tables and chairs had been arranged for eating.

“It’s finally lunch. Let’s go get something to eat, too,” Mr. Fisalis suggested, coming around to escort me as if by instinct, but then I remembered that I couldn’t just agree to that without thinking. *That’s the last thing you want to say now, Viola. Dahlia didn’t give me any medicine, so I’ve got to take extra precautions myself!*

But if I were to say that I didn’t want anything to eat, Mr. Fisalis would suspect that I wasn’t feeling well or had a poor constitution—or at the very least would ask why I wasn’t eating.

“I ate such a big breakfast this morning, so I’m not very hungry. I’ll just have some fruit or something light,” I decided to answer.

There. I don’t mind if he thinks I have a small appetite. It’s not what you say, but how you say it. It’s no joke, either—I’m not sure I could fit a full meal in me with how tightly Stellaria laced my corset this morning. It’s not so tight that I’ll faint, but it’s not exactly letting me move or breathe freely, either. I didn’t think it was possible for a mere garment to squeeze me so tightly that there’s no room for food in my stomach.

Did Dahlia expect me to eat a lot like this? You ladies who force yourselves

into corsets every day have my respect! I, on the other hand, have had just about enough of this squeezing and pinching. I want to go back to my everyday light, comfortable clothes!

Holding back all these thoughts running through my head, I gave Mr. Fisalis a faint smile.

“You really do eat like a bird, Viola. You must be worried about making yourself sick if you eat too much. Feel free to eat only what you can, so I don’t have to worry, either,” Mr. Fisalis replied sympathetically, sighing in relief.

Phew.

Mr. Fisalis and I looked over the line of tables overflowing with a wide variety of delicious-looking food, trying to decide what we wanted to have.

“What about this? This looks really good, too!” Mr. Fisalis suggested, trying to choose food for me.

Hey, were you listening to what I just said? I’m pretty sure I said I wasn’t hungry.

If I didn’t do something, he’d pile up a whole mountain of plates, so I tried to stop him.

“Um... I’ll have just a bite of each.”

I swear I could see the faint outline of a wagging tail behind Mr. Fisalis as he went along cheerily trying to help me pick something, so I couldn’t just bluntly tell him to stop.

But when we returned to the table we shared with the other special ops division members, a sufficient amount of food and drinks in our hands, the first thing I heard:

“You’ll run out of energy unless you eat more!”

I took a bite of food.

Chamomile popped a yummy-looking meatball into her mouth and smiled at me. Even though she was stuffing her face, she still looked classy.

I guess that goes to show how good her upbringing was. But, no, really, I’m

fine. I usually eat whatever the servants do, though, so I just can't handle luxurious food. In fact, I have pretty good stamina and energy, too.

But of course, I couldn't say that!

"She's right! You could stand to put some meat on those bones, Madam!" Angelica added as she ate a slice of smoked meat and a salad loaded with crispy fried toppings.

I chewed said bite of food.

Hmm, I can't definitely think of one part of my body I wish was bigger. Putting on some weight doesn't sound too bad, if it means I could get perfect proportions like her.

I unintentionally checked Angelica out from head to toe.

Eek, what am I? Some creepy old man!?

"Later on, when you're pregnant, I'll be too worried to even sleep at night," Alkanna shockingly let slip after she elegantly cut herself two bite-sized pieces of the smoked meat and fried food that Angelica was eating.

Alkanna! What did you just say!?

I froze in place, so flustered that I couldn't move, wondering if this was what constituted normal conversation for them.

"Why would you be worried? Isn't that the *husband's* job?" Corydalis gently questioned.

"You know, that's true."

"But, like, I'd still worry!"

"Yeah, same here." All the lady knights began happily chatting among themselves.

I guess that was an ordinary thing to say. It flowed from her lips so easily. Phew.

The Bombshell Trio's conversation continued as they elegantly consumed the food they courageously loaded onto their plates.

"Whoa, that looks really good. Where'd you find it?"

“Over there,” I replied.

“I don’t know where ‘over there’ is. Take me there.”

“Wha—!?”

“Was that a no?”

“Of course not, I’d be happy to!”

“Take my plate, too!” the other women asked.

“And mine, too!” all the men joined in.

“Everyone can take their own!”

I had been eating, little by little, the food and fruit I’d split with Mr. Fisalis. All in all, we enjoyed a cheery, chatty meal.

You know what? I like this! It’s always nice to eat with a big group of friends! I should reevaluate my opinion on socializing. Then again, if I had to eat surrounded by the most powerful aristocrats in the city, I bet— No, I’m sure I’d be crying on the inside. But let’s not think about that right now. It’s spoiling the taste of all this food.

As our little group—Mr. Fisalis, his subordinates, and I—all talked and laughed around our table, lots of people began to come over to introduce themselves.

“Duke Fisalis! Congratulations on your accomplishments in the war! Bwahaha!”

“Why, Mr. 00! It’s been ages since I last saw you. I didn’t so much accomplish anything myself as I relied upon my brave subordinates here. They’re the ones deserving of praise.”

“No need to be so humble. Ha ha ha, you’re ever so modest, Duke,” laughed Mr. —*Oh darn it, I already forgot his name. Here we go again. Oh well.*

At any rate... boy, does Mr. Fisalis sound stiff talking to this guy! They should put a picture of this conversation next to “lip service” in the dictionary! This is the first time I’ve ever witnessed this kind of thing in person.

Mr. 00 is rather rotund and greasy in a way that would make me hesitate to call him handsome, isn’t he? In contrast, I can barely find the words to describe

how Mr. Fisalis looks, flashing that smile at him, as though he isn't even the slightest bit put off. It's like he has some sort of magic that makes him appear increasingly more refined and handsome when compared to this man.

One after another, people came to say hello and have a quick chat.

"Oh, yes. Let me take this opportunity to introduce you. This is *my wife*, Viola. Vi, this is my superior..." Mr. Fisalis said, starting to introduce me to someone.

Is it just me, or is he putting extra emphasis on "my wife?" Especially, when he's talking to other knights. What's the point of introducing me now after I already met these nobles at our wedding and the numerous parties we've already been to?

Honestly, when he first started introducing me to these nobles, I was so startled I thought I'd spill the wine glass I was holding. I managed a nice wifely smile instead.

Even though I was surprised by Mr. Fisalis suddenly introducing me to other people like this, I didn't let it show—even though having to make formal introductions was like pulling teeth to me.

"I don't believe we've met. How do you do? My name is Viola. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance," I tittered, offering up a high quality (at least by my estimate) twenty dollar smile along with it.

If I do something wrong, I'm really going to get it from Dahlia at my next etiquette lesson! Earlier, I had to practice smiling for so long my face muscles seized up. She really scares me sometimes.

Nevertheless, whenever the opportunity arose, Mr. Fisalis introduced me as if I were a special item on sale.

"My wife, Viola... My wife here..."

He just kept repeatedly mentioning that I was his wife, and he *always* put extra stress on the "wife" part. I wanted him to stop because it was so embarrassing, and yet...

"Oh, our plates are empty. Why don't we go try something different?" he suggested, during a break in the onslaught of introductions and greetings. I got

up and followed him to get some more food and, wouldn't you know it, we ran into a heavily wounded group of knights.

Oh, these are the handsome men in green from the front lines who received an award after Mr. Fisalis' unit. I forget the name of their unit, but I do remember what they looked like.

Mr. Fisalis noticed first and approached them with a smile even brighter than his previous one.

"Hey there. How are you faring? We couldn't have won this war without you boys."

"C-Commander Fisalis!" The blond-haired, blue-eyed man's voice rose several octaves in surprise when Mr. Fisalis addressed him (because Mr. Fisalis was very, very high up—both among the military and the nobility). And to top things off, he also dropped the silverware he was holding.

Are you maybe overreacting... just a little? I reflexively grilled the clumsy man in my head. *He has such a nice face, despite it being covered in cuts and bruises, but his lack of basic composure totally spoils that.*

Then again, as handsome as he is, compared to Mr. Fisalis he's like a five out of ten. Even though Mr. Fisalis has a lot of disappointing qualities, he's at the top of the charts in the Flür Kingdom for looks.

...Huh? What's this sense of déjà vu I'm feeling? Where was it that I thought this exact same thing? And when? Oh well.

I had a vague feeling that I'd had that exact thought before, but it didn't seem terribly important, so I let it go and refocused my attention on Mr. Fisalis and the knight. Mr. Fisalis was still talking to him.

How odd. Mr. Fisalis is taking such an assertive tone with him. If anything, I had always thought that he didn't like starting conversations at social events.

"I had been looking for a unit that could handle that operation—oh, but it's unseemly to brag about our military strength. Nevertheless, I was right to request you men. No other unit could have pulled off that downhill rush with such skill."

“Y-You flatter us, Commander!” The blond knight seemed scared stiff by Mr. Fisalis’ eloquent praise. *He must be nervous, being addressed by a superior officer (one miles and miles above him, to boot).*

Looking closer, I saw that the other knights looked uncomfortable, too.

I hope they’re alright. They look like they’d fall over if I so much as poked them.

Mr. Fisalis continued to try to engage them, apparently not seeing how nervous they were, and I felt so bad for them that I stepped in to lend a hand.

“Mr. Fisalis... Mr. Fisalis, your subordinates are waiting for us. Let’s pick some fruit and get back to them quickly,” I whispered in his ear as I tugged on his sleeve.

They’re probably going to faint if he bothers them any more!

Mr. Fisalis looked at me and a smile unlike the one he wore before—more of a smirk—spread across his face.

“Good point. Oh, that reminds me. I ought to introduce you, now that I have the chance. This is my wife, Viola. Vi, these are the members of the First Cavalry Company. They were some of the frontline troops who performed outstandingly in the war,” Mr. Fisalis said, introducing me to the knights.

Ohh, he’s at it again with the wife stuff. He’s done this so many times now I’ve lost count, so at least I wasn’t surprised this time.

I plastered a fake wifely smile on my face like I did earlier, and said gracefully (or at least with something that could pass as grace), “Ah, yes, I saw you in the awards portion of the ceremony. Thank you for your service, and congratulations on your award.”

“N-Not at all. It’s an honor to meet you!” the knight replied, his face twitching as he smiled.

Now that I think of it, I gave them one of my twenty dollar smiles during the ceremony, too. In the end, it was just a smile from a plain, quiet girl, so no wonder he didn’t care. Hmph.

7 — With My Parents

After emphasizing to nearly every single noble and knight present that I was *his wife*, Mr. Fisalis finally seemed satisfied. But, boy oh boy, was I embarrassed. Once we'd gotten through basic introductions, we returned again to the table where the other knights from the special ops division were sitting. And maybe this was to be expected from people who had just won a war, but Mr. Fisalis and Corydalis were then immediately whisked away somewhere.

Although the commander and lieutenant commander were now absent, knights and nobles continued to stream nonstop over to where the remaining division members were.

Everyone's involved in a lively conversation, but I don't understand a thing they're talking about. Wehhh, I'm really out of my league here. I'll only be an annoyance if I try to join in, I thought as I nonchalantly moved towards my usual position at parties—the wall—drink in hand. It was then that some hawk-eyed noble spotted me.

"I say, Duchess Fisalis! May I have this dance?"

Seriously? I guess when Mr. Fisalis showed me around the place earlier, it was less to introduce me to everyone and more like when they used to parade criminals around town before their punishment. And this would be the punishment part. That, or this man was sent by Satan, because asking me to dance now of all times could only be the work of pure evil.

Whoopsie. I regressed back to my old self for a minute there. But this guy has no way of knowing what I was just thinking. I can't drop my socializing face in a place like this! Dahlia would have my hide if I did!

Remembering her usual severe scrutiny, I was able to focus myself and, once I handed off my plate and glass to a nearby servant, said, "It would be my pleasure!" with a smile, taking the man's outstretched hand.

I'm going to try my best! Dahlia, Rohtas! Please praise me afterwards!

I clenched my fist as I pictured Dahlia and Rohtas' faces as I walked under the shimmering light of a chandelier.

...Wait, what the heck am I doing? Once this one song is over, some other guy is bound to ask me to dance. Heck... There might not actually be an end in sight.

And so, while Mr. Fisalis was pulled away to talk and socialize, I was pulled away to dance.

Why did it have to turn out like this?

"I think I'm about done with dancing," I said with a sigh. "I gave it my all, but I can't take anymore." At long last, I saw the chance to excuse myself, and you better believe that I took it.

I'm bushed... But I can't let it show on my face. Only a little bit farther until I reach my sanctuary, the wall. Don't give up!

Intending to find an inconspicuous spot to relax, I scanned the venue for the perfect spot.

Found one!

It was quiet and out of the way—in other words, perfect for me... not to mention my parents were also sitting there.

My parents have been grabbing up the best spots for themselves lately, haven't they?

On that note, it was the first time I had seen them all day.

I wonder where they were hiding during the ceremony. I've been so busy since I got here that I haven't had the time to really look around for them. They were probably somewhere hard for me to see, like way in the back.

My parents were hiding, ahem, sitting near a wall behind where the Fisalises were seated. Their disinterest in socializing hadn't changed one bit! I discreetly slipped over to their table.

"I should have known you'd be hiding somewhere like this, Father, Mother. I was just now wondering if I'd ever find you."

"Ah, Viola. These are wonderful seats! Hardly anyone comes this way! I'm

sure Lobata and Angulata are intercepting them for us,” my dearly missed father nonchalantly replied.

Carefree as ever, aren't you, Father? Using my in-laws as an anti-socializing barricade.

“It is a very nice spot, isn't it? Nicely tucked away back here. What did you come over here for, anyway, Vi?” Mother inquired, ignoring Father.

“Mr. Fisalis was pulled away to socialize, so I thought I'd sit with you two.”

“Oh, I see. It must have been a lot for you, making your rounds and then dancing earlier. Tee hee.” Mother gave me a knowing little grin.

So you thought that it wasn't your problem and didn't do anything about it! That much is plain as day!

“It's not funny, Mother! He dragged me around to meet so many people that I thought my face was going to cramp from smiling. And then to top it all off, just when I thought I was finally free, someone asked me to dance. I'm completely wiped out,” I complained as I plopped down next to her.

“I'm sure you are, dear,” she responded, still snickering.

“Now that you're here, how long has it been since we've last seen you? When was it... I suppose the last time was when you were feeling sad and came home? You haven't made any more careless mistakes since then, have you?”

By that, she must mean the incident with the expensive vase. Dang it, Mother, I had completely forgotten about that and you had to go and remind me. Don't reopen old wounds, I beg you.

I see you still haven't learned to forgive and forget, Mother. This is our first time talking since I came home that time, and that's what you decide to bring up?

“No! Don't make me remember thaaaat...” *It still hurts a little to think about, so please just stop bringing it up, Mother.*

“Glad to hear.” She smiled at me, but her smile didn't seem to come naturally.

You knew what you were saying! So then not only did you reopen an old wound, you sprinkled salt in it!

“I haven’t touched a single pricey decoration since then! ...You could also say that the situation at the manor has changed to the point where that wouldn’t even be possible.”

“Your husband’s parents are at the palace fairly often now, aren’t they?” Father asked me in a low voice.

Oh, right, my in-laws are sitting right in front of us, even if they are a little ways away, so it would be awkward if they overheard us. We all lowered our volume.

“Yes. They were being called to war councils almost daily. They’ve been away from home so much I’m sure they’re exhausted,” I said with a little shrug.

“But they’ve been treating you well, right?”

“Yes, very.” I daresay they like me more than their actual son— they give me presents so pricey they make my hands shake. It really only drives home for me that I’m the only one who’s not used to that sort of thing.

“That makes us very happy. Relieved, really. At first I worried about how things would turn out for you.”

“What do you mean?” I cocked my head, unsure of what my mother was implying.

“The duke, Cercis, was well known for keeping a mistress. Despite the rumors and hearsay, however, I would not have turned down a marriage offer from his family. When you objected, though, I figured that was that and planned to tell the duke that you refused... so I was very surprised when you changed your mind. I was tormented, somewhat, with guilt because my precious daughter was forced to bear a marriage proposal from a man with such a reputation,” Father explained.

Oh, so they knew this whole time that he had a lover.

“We’re delighted that our fears were unfounded. I can’t express how grateful I am to Cercis for shouldering our debt, repairing the house, and all the other things he’s done to help us,” Mother followed up.

“I-I agree.” Looks like even though they know about him having a mistress, my

parents don't know about the contract, so I had better just smile, nod, and play along. As far as the money goes, that was in the contract. It was basically a down payment, actually, but he gave it to my parents under the guise of betrothal money.

"I heard that even the mistress we were worried about was sent away at some point. Have you been happy at the duke's manor, Viola?" Mother asked.

When did Mother and Father's expressions turn so serious? And why so suddenly?

"Huh?" I blinked repeatedly in confusion, unable to keep up with where my parents were taking the conversation.

"We never asked about your taste in men, did we? Granted, that Duke Fisalis certainly is handsome and boasts both status and fortune, so I wouldn't complain, myself" Mother said with a nod.

Huh? They were worried about my taste in men!? Not the fact that I might be unhappily married to a guy with a mistress!? It's just like my parents to think like that... It's impressive in a weird way.

My tastes aside, Mr. Fisalis is certainly a fine specimen. He's tall and slim, but not scrawny, just lean and toned. His looks are attractive in a way that everyone admires, man or woman, young or old; he's high ranking in the military, and moreover, rich and powerful even by nobility's standards. Am I leaving anything out?

"Y-Yes, for the most part. But this is a marriage of convenience, right? So I thought our preferences didn't matter as much as what we stood to gain," I replied, flustered for a reason I couldn't explain.

Yeah, and there were definitely a lot of ulterior motives involved! In fact, only ulterior motives. I didn't care if Mr. Fisalis had a girlfriend, so long as he got rid of my family's debt. But I still don't think I want my parents to know about the whole "show wife contract" thing. I'm personally a-okay with contracts, mistresses, and being nothing more than a side woman if it helps my family, but if my parents found that out, I'm positive they'd be upset!

Mother wiped the serious look from her face, though, and said with a smug

smile, “But seeing you two today— Or rather, seeing the duke, was very reassuring! He really loves you, Viola!” She motioned with her head as if pointing, and when I looked to where she was indicating, there were Mr. Fisalis and Corydalis. It went without saying for Mr. Fisalis, but Corydalis was also such a stunningly handsome man that seeing the two of them standing together was almost otherworldly.

Unsurprisingly, the other young ladies here wouldn't let such an opportunity pass them by, even if it is just two cool men standing around. The two of them are so surrounded by social butterflies, that it's like... real butterflies swarming two flowers in a field.

As I was watching Mr. Fisalis, thinking about how popular he was with women, I noticed that his usual gentle smile had vanished and he appeared to be in a terrible mood now. He was frowning, even.

It's rare to see him look so sour. And he was in a good mood just a few minutes ago, too! Not to mention, Corydalis' smile looks pretty strained. Don't they like the attention from all the beautiful ladies around them?

“I see the duke is still popular with women,” Mother commented, still smiling.

I'm just astonished by the sheer number of women flocking to the two of them, completely uncaring of their obvious discomfort. I guess they're not taking “no” for an answer, these ladies. Despite the fact that Mr. Fisalis, at least, is a married man. I'm amazed they'd even bother, knowing that! But what is Mother trying to tell me by pointing that out?

When I looked at her, my confusion clear as day on my face, she just chuckled and said with a smirk, “He never looked so obviously displeased before when women mobbed him. He was very skilled at flattery, as I recall.”

Don't look at me while you're making that face, Mother. Surly as Mr. Fisalis was, however, seeing him surrounded by all those women actually makes me a little annoyed. Fine, then. I calmly turned my gaze elsewhere.

You stop staring at him, too, Mother!

“I've heard that he's extremely good at his job, but he keeps dumping his responsibilities toward his territory onto his father and he's absolutely clueless

about what goes on in the manor,” I told her, sourly.

“Ah, sounds like a typical man, all right. You don’t know anything about keeping a house, either, do you, dear?” Mother said, shooting Father a glance.

“D-Do I not...?”

Father! I see you looking at the ground!

“You certainly don’t. You leave all the housework to Orchis and me.”

“...Yes, darling, you’re right,” Father relented, shrinking under Mother’s glare.

No one defies Mother.

“But Father is very responsible about managing our land, isn’t he?” I said, trying to support him.

“He is, I suppose. But he doesn’t do a thing when it comes to the actual house. An elite personage like the duke, though, has a lot of work for his public office, so perhaps he can’t juggle managing a private territory on top of that.”

“Okay, so maybe his hands are tied there, but men who can easily manage their jobs, their territories, and their homes are so amazing. They’re dependable and reliable.” *Exactly—so I wonder why Mr. Fisalis is content with being ignorant.*

“Don’t get hasty, Vi...” Father said with a strained look.

“I understand your frustration, Viola, but Cercis is still young. Sooner or later I’m sure he’ll catch on, and then he’ll be able to handle everything without a problem,” my mother said in Mr. Fisalis’ defense.

“I hope so.”

“I’m sure he will.”

As kind and gentle as Father is, he has no desire for money or status. Despite that, Mother still supported him even when it was difficult, so perhaps my life with Mr. Fisalis isn’t so bad.

When I turned to look where Mr. Fisalis had been standing moments before, only Corydalis was left, surrounded by women and (still? really?) smiling with difficulty. I looked around, wondering where Mr. Fisalis could have gone, but he

was nowhere to be seen. Assuming he might have headed back to where the rest of the special ops members were sitting, I turned my head that way.

“Vi! I finally escaped the small talk! Sorry to have kept you waiting. Father Euphorbia, Mother Euphorbia, I’m sorry it’s been so long since I last spoke with you,” came Mr. Fisalis’ voice from above my head.

He was behind me this whole time!

After he and my parents had talked pleasantly for a while, he led me back to where the rest of the special ops knights were waiting. There, I once again had the exclusive attention of the Bombshell Trio and passed the rest of the event laughing at the subordinates’ antics. I think we all had a good time—Mr. Fisalis, the special ops members, and my parents included.

Perhaps it was because I was never alone that day that I didn’t have any problems or get in any arguments, and thanks to the buffet lunch, I avoided a public fancy food poisoning incident. I somehow made it through the ceremony to the luncheon.

Maybe it’s not so bad when an event is uneventful!

8 — After We Got Home

I gave 110% from the time I woke up through the repatriation ceremony and on into the luncheon in honor of the soldiers and knights. It was my first time going to an official ceremony, and I was glad to have made it through without any blunders along the way. At least, I don't *think* I made any blunders along the way.

And so I found myself once again on the way home, riding in the gently-rocking carriage with Mr. Fisalis and my in-laws. As usual, the Fisalis' carriage provided a comfortable ride—so comfortable, in fact, that if I wasn't careful, I was sure to doze off.

I'm just super worn out after a busy day of dancing, talking with everybody, and joking around with Mr. Fisalis' subordinates! But I can't let myself doze off in front of my in-laws. I've just gotta hold on for a bit longer! The social event doesn't end until I get home!

I listened to my in-laws and Mr. Fisalis' conversation to dispel my drowsiness.

"The official stance is that we've formed an alliance. In actuality, though, I suppose it wouldn't be wrong to say that Aurantia is under Flür's control..."

"Right you are. And now that they are, in terms of strategy, we..."

Could you all possibly please talk about something other than politics? That's guaranteed to make me fall asleep.

When we arrived back at the manor, the entire staff was there to meet us, all lined up at the carriage porch.

"Welcome home," they greeted us in a chorus of voices.

"Ahhh, it's good to be back," I sighed.

All I want to do is go straight to my room, tear off this dress and corset, and dive into bed... but I've got to wait just a little longer. It's already pretty late—the moon is high in the sky and shining right now. We'd normally have had

dinner already, I bet. Of course, meal service is over for the day, so there won't be any dinner tonight.

I wonder what Father and Mother Fisalis will do now. I guess they'll probably have tea at the main house, but I'm so worn out from today that I'll have to pass on that invite.

Putting my inner monologue on mute for a moment, I quickly glanced over at my father-in-law and the others.

"We're finally home. What a long day we've had! I'm beat," Father Fisalis said to the servants.

"Naturally, sir," Rohtas respectfully replied.

"We're going to retire to the cottage for today. We're still full from lunch, so just bring over some light sweets and tea, will you?" he indicated to Rohtas, already eager to go back to the cottage as he drew my mother-in-law to his side.

"As you wish, sir."

As soon as Rohtas replied, I saw Lady Fisalis' personal maid disappear from the entryway without so much as a sound. *She's activated her ninja powers, I see. She didn't waste any time at all! But wait, are her ninja skills really all that good if I still noticed her? Maybe I only noticed because I'm half servant myself!*

"Cercis, Viola... you both must be tired, too. You should go and relax now."

"Have a good night, Vi."

"You have a good night, as well, Father and Mother Fisalis."

After we all said our goodnights, Lord and Lady Fisalis headed straight for the path to the cottage as Mr. Fisalis and I lightly waved after them. For a brief moment, their retreating silhouettes reminded me so much of a pair of lovers on a moonlit rendezvous that I couldn't hold back a smile. We watched them go until they rounded the corner of the manor.

Wellll, now that my worries have fled, I can just take it ea— Correction: my worries are still here. There's one more person still in the manor.

"Come on, you'll catch a chill in this night air. Let's go inside. I'm tired, too,"

Mr. Fisalis said, putting his hand on my shoulder and leading me inside with practiced ease.

Nooo, he did it in front of the servants again. This is sooo embarrassing.

“You had a busy day too, Mr. Fisalis.”

“Well, what would you like to do now? Maybe a light meal?”

“Oh, gosh, I don’t think I could eat another bite!” *Metaphorically and literally. I’ve been snacking since noon and now either my corset is going to pop or I will. We’ve both reached our limits!*

“Maybe just some tea, then?” Mr. Fisalis persisted.

“I’m so worn out after today that I’m just going to go straight to bed. And you had to go to an official function right after you got home from the frontlines. You haven’t had a chance to relax, either, right? Let him take a break, Rohtas.” *Yeah, show him some appreciation instead of me, for once, I tried to signal to Rohtas with my eyes.*

Let. Me. Go. Already. I’m running out of time to take off all these clothes and this makeup before I head to bed. Alarm bells are literally going off in my head right now. WARNING: YOU ARE NOW APPROACHING THE DANGER ZONE.

...But of course I couldn’t possibly tell Mr. Fisalis that, so I had to gently turn him down, using his own exhaustion as a pretense.

But he was awfully chatty for someone who was supposedly worn out.

Pleeease understand that I want nothing more than to go back to my own room.

“Oh, no, I feel just fine.”

“No, no, you’re definitely tired—you might not be able to tell, but we can! Isn’t that right, Rohtas?”

“Quite right, Madam. Young as you are, Master, the fatigue will still build up within your body, so I do believe you ought not try to push yourself too hard.” Seeing Mr. Fisalis continue to resist my suggestion, and furthermore understanding *why* I was suggesting it, Rohtas stepped in to provide some much appreciated back up. *Good job, Rohtas!*

Mr. Fisalis shot Rohtas a hard look, but quickly made a face as if coming to a realization before his expression changed once again—this time lighting up in understanding.

“You’re completely right. I shouldn’t overdo it now, so that I can spend as much time with you as possible while I’m on leave!”

Oh yeah, I forgot about that. He got fourteen days of vacation as part of his reward from the king...

“Th-That’s right! Ah ha ha ha!” Please ignore my blabbering.

And so, after walking with Mr. Fisalis to his room, seeing him inside, and then asking Rohtas and Mr. Fisalis’ maid to look after him for the evening, I finally, *finally* made it back to my own room.

Yeeesh, that took longer than expected!

“Phew... the end of another busy day! I really worked my butt off!”

I began to strip off my fancy dress like I was removing battle armor the instant the door to my room closed.

Must. Escape. From. Corset.

I peeled off my gown and tossed it onto the floor. *Layer one: off! Next up is the corset... Hmm, this is the kind that someone else has to help you into, so the ribbon is in the back. I can’t see it. Where is it?*

“Oh, Madam, no need for all that! I’m right here!” Stellaria ran over from where she had been filling the tub as I felt around trying to find the ribbon, my neck craned over my shoulder. Before I could argue, I heard and felt the ribbon loosen with a *shoop shoop* as it slid through the eyelets under Stellaria’s dexterous fingers. I slowly felt my lungs fill with air the moment the ribbon was loosened.

“Whoa... Feels like I’m coming back to life,” I said after taking a breath from deep in my belly, reveling in the feeling of freedom.

“Madam! I dare say, you are exaggerating! I didn’t tie it that tight. Not *today*, anyway,” Stellaria chided with a broad grin, bending to pick up the gown I had just shed.

Are... Are you saying it could be tied tighter than this...!? Now that I think of it, I guess I have heard of women fainting from tying their corsets too tightly.

My cheek twitched spontaneously as I asked myself why anyone would subject themselves to such torture, but Stellaria seemed completely unfazed.

“But about today... I normally don’t wear a corset or anything, so this was really rough, even if it wasn’t all that tight! Oh, but then again—it did have the benefit of preventing me from overeating.”

“I did take that into account, of course,” Stellaria replied with a smile that suggested doing so was only natural for her.

“Wow!” I exclaimed, gazing at her with a look of admiration.

She thought that far ahead when she was adjusting my corset! I think I’m a little smitten with her advanced maid skills!

“I thought that there might not be enough time for you to take your medicine beforehand, but I wondered if your stomach might just be able to tolerate sumptuous fare in small doses. After all, since coming here, you’ve been served a wider variety of foodstuffs, so your body ought to be at least a little acclimated. Which is why I determined that you would likely be fine,” Dahlia explained, pausing for a moment to put away my gown, which she’d taken from Stellaria.

Now that she says it out loud, I’m convinced she’s right. I’ve been eating incredible food every day, at every meal, since I married into the Fisalis family. I’ve had whatever the servants were eating and simple things, too, but they all shared the same ingredients as Mr. Fisalis’ meals. They must have been very high quality.

I get it now. Unbeknownst to me, I’ve been building up tolerance for richer food!

I can’t say that I’m too proud that my palate has become “refined”... Can’t change the past, though.

“That makes sense. My stomach doesn’t get ambushed by fancy food anymore.”

“Precisely,” Dahlia confirmed.

“So then as long as I eat only a small amount, I won’t get fancy food poisoning?”

“Yes, so it seems.”

“Alright. I’ll try to be conscientious of my portion size from now on.”

“Please do. Oh, but I think I’ll still get your medicine ready for when you go on outings with Master,” she added with a grim smile.

Speaking of you, Mr. Fisalis—even though I said that I wasn’t hungry at the party today, you still tried to bring stacks of plates back to the table.

I smiled just as grimly, remembering how he had acted earlier that day. *Dahlia sure knows Mr. Fisalis well.*

“Thank yooooou!” *I could just hug Dahlia right about now!*

Now that I was out of my fancy, uncomfortable clothes and my bath was ready, I slipped into the water.

I heard that some nobles have maids help them bathe, but it seems like everyone here prefers privacy. Neither Dahlia nor Mimosa ever barge in on me, and I suppose they take a strict stance of “don’t come unless called for.” Of course, a near-peasant like me has never had the luxury of being bathed by a servant, which is why I take baths in the way I’m used to. Not to mention I’d die of embarrassment if someone saw me naked! Once I’m out of the tub, though, they won’t stop fawning over me.

It seems like both Mr. Fisalis and my in-laws also bathe by themselves, so I guess the whole family doesn’t make their servants wait on them hand and foot, either.

Thank you for tuning into this special Fisalis family bath report. I’m your host, Viola.

...Anyway, enough of that.

After I washed my hair and body with pleasantly fragrant soap, I laid back to soak in the rose petal-strewn water. The petals also produced a wonderful smell and were plucked like roses from the garden. There was even a little rose oil—

homemade, of course—added to the water! It seemed like too much to me, but I didn't push it when everyone told me that this was normal. That had really shocked me when I had first arrived there, but more than half a year later, I was totally used to it. I shuddered as I realized how accustomed I'd become to luxury.

Oh, and the flowers, oils, and whatnot were different every day. They were chosen based on my physical and mental state. Mimosa was thrilled to do it for me, but ever since she had found out she was pregnant, it seemed like Dahlia had taken over that job.

"You're very sensitive to scents when you're relaxed," Dahlia had explained. I hadn't realized that was true of me.

As I relaxed into the warm water, I could feel the day's exhaustion melt away. I let my mind wander aimlessly as I stared at the ripples on the surface of the bath.

Ahhh. What a long day. Both the king's speech and the repatriation ceremony were so darn looong. But Mr. Fisalis and the knights didn't so much as twitch the whole time. They're so cool.

The knights who received awards just after Mr. Fisalis and his division sure were beat up, though. Or maybe I was just really impressed that Mr. Fisalis' division didn't have a single scratch on them by comparison. And even though those other knights, the frontline troops, were all covered in bandages and gauze, they all still had pretty chiseled features (relative to Mr. Fisalis, anyway). We won the war and we're at peace now, all thanks to their efforts and hard work. I really should be grateful.

Anyway, I'm glad I made it through today's social event without incident. Something always happened at the events I attended before this one! Well, then again, Mr. Fisalis did show me off like a prized pony, so... that's something that happened.

And I'd misunderstood Miss Iris' intent when she started talking to me, way back when. And then there was when Mr. Fisalis really embarrassed me (seriously, it sometimes seems like he's doing that on purpose) right after the confrontation with Miss Verbena.

And then more recently, those knights hit on me at the deployment ceremony...

Hit on... by knights? ...Hm? I feel like I'm overlooking something here. Let me think:

["There you are, you pretty young thing. You had me quite confused back there when you suddenly disappeared, my beautiful little fairy."]

The day of the deployment ceremony.

What was it those sleazy knights called themselves, again? The Something Company?

Something Company...

["I'm ●●● from the First Company. I'm the □□□, I do all the △△△."]

The First Company!? I'm not totally sure, because military stuff really isn't my forte, but that sounds like the right name.

That one knight was blond and had blue eyes. They were all wearing dark green uniforms. I think I even thought he had a pretty handsome face, even though he wasn't anywhere near Mr. Fisalis' level... Oh, yes, that was when I coined "good-looking but good-for-nothing!"

["This award goes to the First Cavalry Company, who put forth the most effort in combat. First Cavalry Company, please come forward."]

I'm pretty sure those soldiers called up to the podium by the king himself were the First Cavalry... If only I'd been paying better attention. I think they had dark green uniforms on, too.

...Wait, what? Those lousy knights I ran into at the deployment ceremony... sure did resemble the knights who got that award today.

Wait? That means...? That was them...!?

Fuzzy though it was, I was shocked by the image that formed in my mind.

AAAAAHHHH, that was totally them!

The long-forgotten memory of those men hit me with such speed and force that my mind reeled.

Ohmygoshohmygoshohmygosh! Mr. Fisalis introduced me as “my wife, Viola” to those guys, too! I’ve got a million bad feelings running through my brain right now, but it’s all got to be my imagination, right? Right?

Mr. Fisalis was on the front lines when it happened, so he shouldn’t have known about them hitting on me at the rally, right? ...Unless. Wait. Consul Argenteia was there then, too. And I think I recall being told that he and Mr. Fisalis are old friends. Meaning, it’s possible that... he told Mr. Fisalis about that incident. I sure hope it was through a private message, at least, and not an official letter...

So then, Mr. Fisalis heard from Consul Argenteia that the knights from the First Company hit on me at the rally, and as revenge, he made those guys lead the charge? Yeah, I can see him doing that, considering how he’s been acting lately. It all makes sense now! So that means they got those wounds because they hit on me!? I hate to imagine it, but all the signs point to that... I can’t believe it... That was my fault... They must have been terrified when they saw me.

This is inexcusable! What’s more, I’m an even bigger idiot than I thought possible for totally forgetting their faces and company name! I wanna sink under this tub water and just disappear!

Alas, I could only submerge myself up to my neck.

All of a sudden, I have a boatload of apologies I feel like I should make. Maybe I’m better off pretending like I never realized. No... I’ve already forgotten plenty. I’ll just pretend like I didn’t remember who they were.

I think I’m starting to overheat. I’ve been in here longer than usual, and then I freaked out just now. Plus, I’m still worn out after all that socializing... I should really get out... Ugh, I’m super dizzy.

Some time later:

“Ahhh! Madam!? Stay with me, Madam!”

Dahlia came into the bathroom to check on me when I didn't come out for quite a long time. Needless to say she made quite a clamor when she found me draped limply over the edge of the tub.

9 — Just a Little Dizzy In the Bath

I'd passed out from sitting in the bath for too long as I let my mind wander. When I came to, someone had laid in my bed.

Ummmm.

How did I get here?

I was definitely unconscious until a second ago, so I couldn't possibly have walked here myself. I guess someone must have carried me. Hmm, yep... zero memory. What happened to me?

There was a cool, damp towel on my forehead. It felt nice against my flushed skin, so I reflexively tried to touch it, but when I raised my hand, I felt something else raise with it.

What's this?

"Oh! You're awake!"

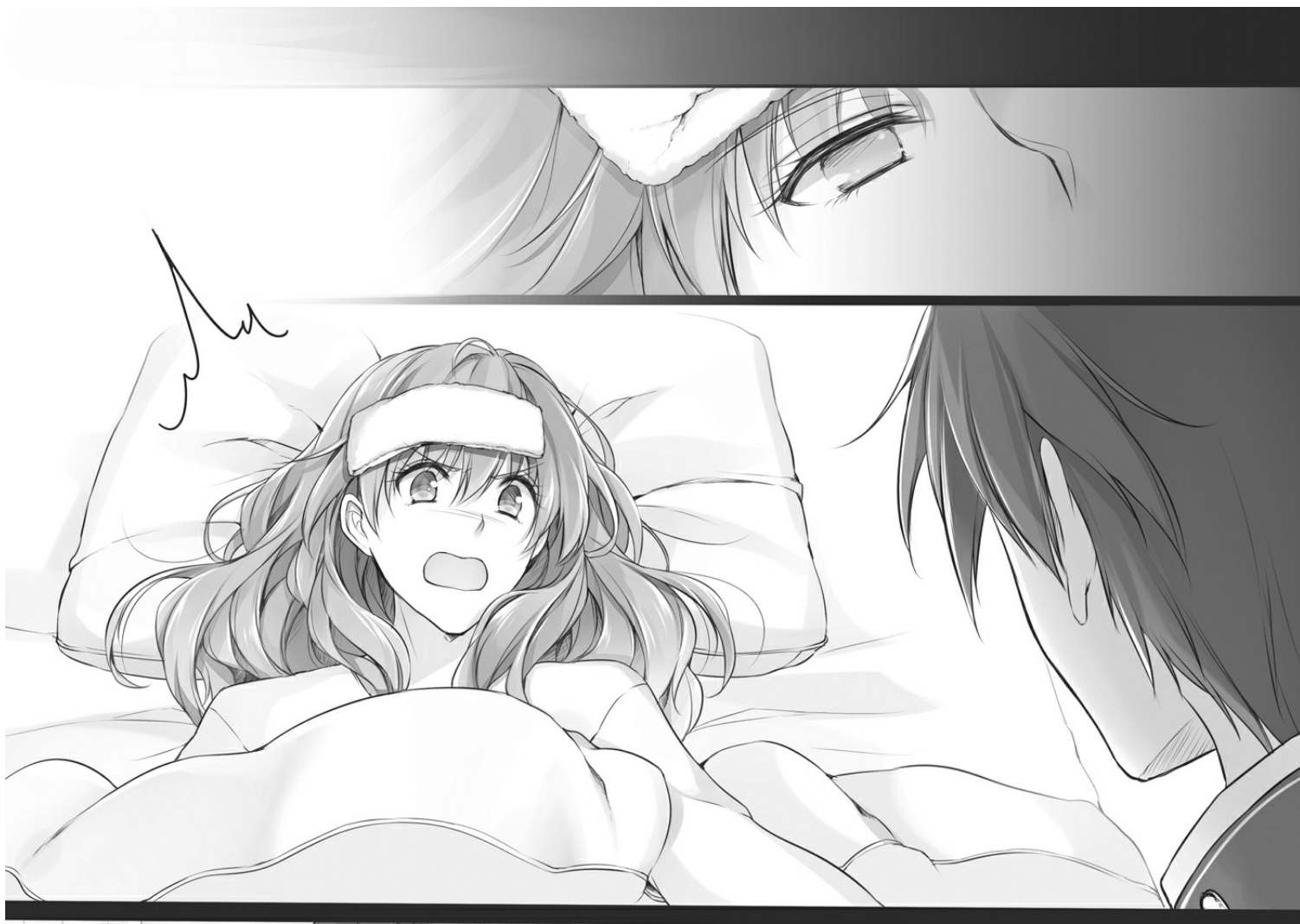
While I stared blankly at my hand, Mr. Fisalis in turn was staring at me with a worried look in his eyes. The heavy weight on my hand was Mr. Fisalis' own hand, clasped firmly around it. *When I was lifting my hand, I was also lifting his. That must be the cause of all the weight.* In other words, he'd captured my poor hand in another one of his death grips.

...Wait, what's Mr. Fisalis doing here!?

Upon *that* realization, my mind cleared shockingly fast. I swear I even silently screamed—that's how startled I was.

Mr. Fisalis!? But he went back to his own room, right? I even escorted him there, too... right? So why the heck is he here in my room!?

I descended into full-blown panic as the fog lifted from my mind. When I looked around, I saw Dahlia, Stellaria (still standing in for Mimosa), Rohtas, the Fisalis family doctor, and several other maids where I would have expected to see just Dahlia and Mimosa.



Goodness, the population density in here seems to have gro— Ahem. I mean, what's with this audience? Is this an emergency!? ...Calm down. Try to remember what happened.

I was relaxing in the bath. I think I was going over everything that happened during the day, and realized that the knights who were covered in injuries were the same ones who had hit on me, got really upset, felt too hot, got dizzy, and then passed out. So... of course I was naked, too!

That snapped me the rest of the way out of my fog, and I quickly took stock of what was going on under the duvet thrown over me... Phew! It looked like someone had put me in my nightgown.

It was probably Dahlia and Stellaria who got me dressed (more like... I sure hope it was them!), but I can ask later. Everything's good for now.

"Ummm, what happened to me?" I asked Mr. Fisalis timidly.

"You passed out in the bathroom. Dahlia found you, fortunately, but if she hadn't, you could have easily drowned. Were you not feeling well?" he asked with a somewhat frightened expression, his usual smile nowhere to be seen.

Uh, um, ah ha! I-I don't think I would have drowned, but I doubt that's going to make anyone feel any less worried!

"I'm very sorry! And no, I wasn't feeling sick or anything..." There was nothing I could do except apologize, but I wished I could just disappear instead.

I'm never gonna live this down.

"Regardless, you gave me quite a scare! From now on, how about you have a maid with you while you're bathing?"

"I'm fine by myself! I'll make sure I never, ever pass out in there again! I mean, I can't just foist more work on the poor maids! Ah ha ha ha!"

Please at least let me bathe by myself! I'm not some fancy-pants noble who needs a servant to wash them! That would be like torture to me! You really get a kick out of embarrassing me, don't you? There, I said it—even if it is off the record!

He's getting way overprotective. I just got a little dizzy in the bath!

“No—if something were to happen to you...” Mr. Fisalis continued to object.

“Now, now, Master Fisalis. The duchess simply became dizzy from the bath because she was exhausted. Dahlia even said that she was not unconscious for very long, so I don’t believe there’s any need for that degree of concern,” the doctor said gently with a calm smile, attempting to dissuade Mr. Fisalis.

Thanks for the support, doctor! I’m glad to hear I wasn’t out of it for very long.

I actually didn’t have any symptoms other than a touch of dizziness, and over the course of Stellaria replacing the damp towel and the maids fanning and fawning over me, I had quickly recovered from overheating.

“Drink this,” Stellaria told me as she handed me a cold, cloudy white concoction. Mr. Fisalis lifted me up so I could lean against a pillow and take the cup from her. Looking at it, I assumed it was an herbal infusion, but Stellaria explained (with a cute smile, no less), “This is Cartham’s special rehydration formula. It’s made with lemon, molasses, and a pinch of salt. It feels wonderful on your throat when it’s dry. I woke him up to make some for you!”

Oh, so you woke up poor Cartham. Send him my apologies.

When I took a sip of the medicine, it felt like my body immediately sucked it up like a sponge—*shlurrrp!* I imagined it like water soaking into dry sand.

“Oh, it tastes good.” It had a very strange flavor, sour and salty but also faintly sweet, but it felt so good and soothing to my dry throat that I gulped down the rest in a hurry.

That really hit the spot, I thought with a sigh. *I can taste the love that Cartham and his family put into it.*

When the doctor eventually gave his diagnosis of “just fine,” the relief in the room was palpable.

Ugh, I feel so ashamed, though.

It didn’t feel like anything was wrong with my body, either. I didn’t know how long I had been unconscious for, but it was late into the night.

Mr. Fisalis and the servants must be tired after working all day; there’s no excuse for me to keep them up any later.

“I’m sorry for making you all worry at this hour. And you as well, Mr. Fisalis, especially when you must be very worn out from today. I’m fine now, so you all can go back to bed.”

I had hoped that that would satisfy everyone and they would leave, but:

“What are you saying!? She might be fine now, but what would happen if she were to take a sudden turn for the worse later tonight!? I’m still quite worried, so I’ll stay with her tonight, but I also want several maids stationed in this room,” Mr. Fisalis told me, glancing at Dahlia.

“Two of you, stay here,” he ordered the maids. “Dahlia, I think you’ve done enough for tonight. You’ll catch a cold if you stay in those wet clothes. We can’t have you absent for too long—Viola needs you. And thank you for saving her, too,” he added to Dahlia.

I didn’t notice it until now, but Dahlia’s uniform—mainly the sleeves and her apron—are dark and wet. That’s all my fault toooo.

“Th-Thank you, Master!” Dahlia blinked in surprise for a split second before schooling her features and nodding.

Zoning out for a second, I thought to myself, He’s right—if Dahlia got sick, I’d be the one who suffered the most. No, the whole manor would be suffering. I agree, she should go and take care of herself right away, but the way you said it so bluntly right in front of her was... not great, Mr. Fisalis. You didn’t so much as bat an eye when you said it, either, so you didn’t leave any room for objection. But if I make a fuss now, that’ll just keep the servants from their rest even longer. That means I need to hear him out so I don’t cause further trouble for everyone. Yeah, I’ll do this for them. ...Mimosa’s not here, though, so I guess the fish figurine won’t be making an appearance tonight.

Flustered, or maybe still a little confused, I nodded in agreement with Mr. Fisalis’ comment.

“Stellaria, you may go to bed too, since you only just arrived today. These two will attend to Madam for the night,” Rohtas said, motioning with his head to the two maids behind him. The two maids, both of them already hard at work, were members of the Spa Squad; they shot me subtle matching grins and a pair of thumbs-up. *You know, I suddenly feel like I’m going to be okay even without*

the fish!

Rohtas and the others left the maids with us before turning in, and soon my room returned to its usual calm state. Accepting that I had zero say in the matter, I surrendered half the bed to Mr. Fisalis.

I'll just balance here on the edge... but know that I'm only giving up most of my bed to you because I don't want to bother you when you're tired.

"I'm sorry for scaring you and making you worry. I hope you'll sleep well, even though it might be difficult since this isn't your own room," I bid Mr. Fisalis good night as I held up the duvet for him.

"I'll be staying up to take care of you in case your condition worsens while you're asleep," he indicated from where he was sitting on the bed.

"But aren't you tired from today, too?"

"I'm used to sleep deprivation, so staying up all night isn't going to hurt me."

Hmm, this is a problem. Now I'm not going to be able to sleep, either! What do I do now?

"There, there, Madam! There's no need to worry about that when you're unwell! Please, go to sleep!"

"Oh, your towel's no longer cold! Here, I'll change it!"

"Fiiine."

The maids rushed over to begin their care and somehow, to my astonishment, they managed to lull me to sleep. And furthermore:

"You must be tired, too, Master, so please feel free to sleep as well. Ah, you still have not had your bath yet. My humble apologies. I'll prepare one for you in this bathroom. Please don't fret about Madam—we will make sure she is *properly* looked after!"

"Yes, until morning!"

Mr. Fisalis said nothing in reply to the cheekily grinning maids.

Yeah, I've got nothing to worry about!

And so, I fell asleep, my mind completely at ease, beneath their splendid

smiles. And Mr. Fisalis? Well, he just quietly made his way into the bathroom.

10 — A Busy Morning

Come morning, the first thing my eyes opened up to was Mr. Fisalis' beautiful, sleeping face.

Waaah! I wasn't expecting that. I'm definitely wide awake now. Probably not being fully awake was the only thing that kept me from shrieking out loud at that sight. Oh yes, now I remember... All that stuff happened and then he ended up sleeping in here with me.

Well, at first he insisted on staying up all night, but the maids convinced him to go to sleep. Good job, ladies. Border guard Officer Fish wasn't on duty, but Mr. Fisalis remembered his manners and stayed on his side of the bed because the maids were here.

Speaking of the fish figurine, I haven't seen Mr. Fisalis asleep since that time he ended up cuddling it while he slept. Mr. Fish isn't the only thing absent here, either: there's no tear tracks on Mr. Fisalis' face this time.

This is my first time getting a good long look at him while he's asleep. I'd be too embarrassed to ever gaze this deeply upon his radiant visage while he's awake, so this is my chance to ogle and I'm gonna take it! Jeez, attractive people are still attractive even when they're asleep... I'm totally jealous.

He even looks kind of innocent. He's like a completely different person—not stiff and formal at all... Is this what they mean when they say someone is “two-faced!?”

His eyelashes are long and fluffy, even though he's a guy... We girls really can't catch a break. And I know that when he opens his eyes, they'll be a dignified dark brown. No wonder he's so popular with everyone, young or old, man or woman (well, maybe not so much the men☆). I'm totally jealous. Wait, didn't I just say that?

As I was appreciating Mr. Fisalis' fine bone structure, Dahlia quietly called out, just above a whisper, “Madam, are you awake?” from the other side of the

canopy. I turned my head towards her voice.

“Yes, I’m awake. Good morning, Dahlia,” I whispered back.

Never wake a sleeping baby, as they say.

“How are you feeling today?”

“I seem to be better. Is it already time to get up?”

“It’s still early. Would you like to stay in bed a while longer?”

“Yeah, I’ll get up soon. But Mr. Fisalis is still sound asleep, so I’ll have to get ready in the dressing room this morning.”

“That you will.” We conversed in hushed voices.

Since we’d cause a commotion and wake up Mr. Fisalis if I got ready in my bedroom like I usually did, I decided to get dressed in my spacious walk-in closet. I still couldn’t believe that my closet really was big enough to allow that!

I climbed out of bed as quietly as I could and tiptoed over to Dahlia before following her into the dressing room. Stellaria was close behind me.

Wow, we can fit three people in here easily! What a closet!

Stellaria briskly selected an outfit for the day and held it up for my approval. It was a simple dress, but had slightly more frills than my usual fare.

Yesterday’s gown had been like that too, so maybe Stellaria just liked styles that were a bit more feminine and glamorous. It wasn’t *too* flashy, though, so it was still within my comfort zone, and it was always refreshing to wear something different than Mimosa’s usual choices.

Once I’d changed into the dress, I tied my hair loosely to the side, and I was finished getting ready.

Will we do my makeup in the salon, too, since the noise might wake him up?

It took only a few minutes to get ready. When I crept out of the dressing room, Mr. Fisalis’ maid gave a look. It seemed like Mr. Fisalis was still sound asleep.

He probably wasn’t able to sleep very well, between getting all worked up over my fainting incident and then having to sleep cramped to one side of my

bed. The least I can do is let him sleep for as long as he wants.

Still, I was done getting ready earlier than usual, so I left Mr. Fisalis under his maid's care before the three of us tiptoed out of the room. We did, in fact, do my makeup in the salon. I wasn't going anywhere special that day, so I didn't need anything fancy in that department.

"I know I was excited yesterday because you were wearing formal attire, but you really do have lovely skin, Madam. Just some light makeup is more than enough," Stellaria said as she brushed on a sheer layer of powder.

"I do? That must just be the result of Mimosa's hard work. And even without her, I still have the Spa Squad taking care of me."

"Heh heh heh. I'll take your word for it. I'm going to give you a hand massage now, I think. Rough hands will be a dead give away to your *daytime activities*," said Stellaria with an impish smile.

Well that's alarming to learn! But how did Stellaria know!?

Shocked into obedience, I gave Stellaria my hand. Soon I was in heaven as she massaged a generous amount of scented oil into my hands. This, combined with the effects of the aroma left me relaxed and spellbound. *Oh no... I might fall asleep again.*

"I'm sorry about last night. You had to work late because of me."

"I was nothing, Madam. I'm just relieved you are well."

"I'm still so embarrassed," I whined. "Dahlia didn't catch a cold, did she? She got out of her wet clothes, right away?"

"Yes. Once Master thanked her, she had a warm bath in her room and was able to go to sleep right after."

"Oh, that makes me feel better. She got wet pulling me out of the bathtub after all."

"That we did. Oh, and once you were out of the bath, Stellaria and I were the ones who dressed you in your bathrobe, so there's no need to worry about that."

Oh, Dahlia. You always know exactly what it is I want to hear. That means I

was able to avoid exposing myself to Mr. Fisalis!

“Master arrived as soon as we finished dressing you; he asked to move you to your room and then carried you to your bed. We asked him to step out for a moment after that so we could change you into your nightgown.”

Yep, that’s just what I wanted to hear from Dahlia. Thank you—I was feeling really uneasy about what happened while I was unconscious.

“Oh, what a relief to hear. I’m sorry that I caused you so much trouble.”

“Not at all. There really is no need to keep apologizing.”

“You too, Stellaria. Thank you for the drink. You said that Cartham made it for me, right? Wouldn’t he have already been asleep at that hour? As in, you had to make him get out of bed...”

“Make him! Ha, he practically *leaped* out of bed when I told him you had an emergency.”

“...I’d still better apologize to him later.”

Just as I was sighing in relief, finally learning from them what had transpired the night before while I was unconscious:

“Viola! Oh, there you are!” The door to the salon flew open with a loud *bang* and Mr. Fisalis burst— I mean, stepped in.

Is he trying to give me a heart attack!? Every time he does something like that, my heart skips a beat... Okay, calm down.

Anyway.

Both Dahlia and Stellaria were staring in stock at Mr. Fisalis, likely wondering why he thought it was a good idea to fling the door open so forcefully.

Mr. Fisalis paused for a moment in relief when he saw me there. He must have run straight down from bed because he was still in his dark gray silk pajamas. His usually perfectly coiffed brown hair was currently a textbook example of bedhead, sticking out all over the place. What could have made him panic so much that he came to find me like this?

“Good morning. Whatever is the matter?” Stellaria inquired of him, once he

had calmed down, as she continued to massage my hands.

“Viola wasn’t there when I got up. I thought something had happened...” *It looks like his worry from last night hasn’t worn off yet.*

“Oh, I see. I just woke up earlier than normal and I felt fine, so I got ready down here. I wanted to let you sleep in, since it was my fault you were up so late last night. I’m very sorry for that... for causing you to worry about me. Since the maids were with me, though, I didn’t have any trouble at all. *Or, more bluntly... I knew better than to wake a sleeping baby.*

“...Oh, I didn’t hear you leave. How silly of me...” Mr. Fisalis mumbled, just barely audible.

“What did you say?” I asked back.

“Nothing.”

“Why don’t you get ready, too, Master, now that you’ve seen that Madam is alright? We cannot serve breakfast when you are still in your pajamas.”

“Oh? Oh, sure. I’ll go change. Viola, you go on ahead to the dining room.” It took a gentle nudge from Dahlia for Mr. Fisalis to finally realize that he had never gotten properly dressed. Before leaving the salon, he gave me a shy smile.

“...What was that all about?” I muttered, staring at the doorway through which Mr. Fisalis made his hasty exit. It had been a whirlwind of activity today and I hadn’t even made it to breakfast yet.

Turning to me once she had closed the door, Dahlia said, “He really was worried about you. Why don’t we make our way to the dining room? Master will return soon,” with a grin.

Based on what I had heard at the ceremony the day before, Mr. Fisalis and the whole special ops unit were awarded fourteen days of vacation. *Hmmm, that’s a long time.*

I did not, however, hear when that vacation was to begin. *Could it perhaps start today?* I wondered as I waited in the dining room for Mr. Fisalis to finish getting ready in his own room.

“Is Mr. Fisalis’ vacation starting today?” I asked Rohtas, figuring he was the most likely to know. After all, he kept the schedules for everyone and everything in the whole manor, including Mr. Fisalis, up there in his noggin!

“No, Master is scheduled to go to work today,” he replied without even having to think about it. “I’ve been informed that its start depends on when his remaining business is completed, but if you want a more detailed explanation, you ought to ask him.”

“Ah, thank you.”

When his remaining business is completed, huh? Well, I suppose he still has to submit the reports he wrote on the front lines, plus any accumulated work from when he was gone.

In the meantime, as I thought this through, Mr. Fisalis returned from getting dressed—calmly, this time—and cheerfully strode into the dining room.

I don’t think I’ll ever get used to seeing Mr. Fisalis in his nice clothes, or get tired of it no matter how many times I see him. He’s wearing his knight’s uniform now, so he must be off to work right after this, just like Rohtas said.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. Let’s have some breakfast, shall we?” he said pleasantly, taking a seat in the chair Rohtas pulled out for him.

At his prompting, the different dishes were brought out one by one. And of course, everything was perfectly portioned for Mr. Fisalis and I!

As I dug in to another one of Cartham’s signature breakfasts, clearly made with love, Mr. Fisalis said, “Although I wish I could start my vacation right now, I have the reports from the front and a few other things left to do, so it looks like my break won’t start for a few more days.”

Wow, that was exactly what Rohtas said, too!

“I see.”

“I’m going to work my very hardest, because I’d like my break to come sooner rather than later!” he announced in an overdramatic fashion.

He says it like he’s going to manifest some sort of new super power. Can’t you even be normal at breakfast? Then again, I can understand wanting a break

after working your butt off for so long.

“Er, yes. You do that. You deserve a break after how long you were away.”

“You bet I do! I’ve got to make up for the time I wasn’t with you!”

“You want *that!*?” I reflexively responded, just a tad too aggressively.

So it’s not time off you want so much as time with me.

“Yes! And I’m going to give one-hundred-fifty percent at work to get it,” he announced again, paying no heed to my inappropriate response.

“O-Okay.” I can’t complain about him wanting to do well at his job, so I’d best just leave it at that.

When breakfast was over and I walked Mr. Fisalis out the door, I found Lord and Lady Fisalis there. Lord Fisalis appeared to be in a bad mood, either as a result of being called into another dull meeting or because Lady Fisalis wouldn’t be there with him this time.

“But why do I have to go too?” he complained.

“I’m off to work, Viola! Let’s go, Father. The sooner we go, the sooner we can come home!” Mr. Fisalis said as he dragged his father away.

“Have a nice daaay!” Lady Fisalis called to them with a wave of her hand, her smile as bright as ever.

“Have a good day at work!” I called after them, too, as Rohtas watched wordlessly from behind me.

Whew! I’ve already been so busy and the day has just begun!

11 — Closet Check!

Rohtas calmly closed the front door with a muffled thud after Mr. Fisalis and his father had rushed out. As soon as the door was shut, the usual palpable silence returned to the entryway. I may or may not have been glad they'd finally left.

Just when I thought our little group would disperse, my mother-in-law turned to me from waving off the men with a smile and said, "Those troublesome boys are finally gone for the day. Let's get started then, Vi." The broad grin on her face was totally different from the one she'd given Lord Fisalis and Mr. Fisalis a moment before.

What does she mean? I've got a bad feeling about this.

I was immediately on high alert. What she uttered in reply was the absolute last thing I expected to hear.

"I just want to take a look in your closet, Vi." She continued to smile at me, despite my jaw hitting the ground.

Huh? Why does she want to check my closet now?

"My closet?" I asked, unable to guess what she could be getting at with such a startling statement.

Why on earth would she want to look in my closet? She's snickering like she finds my dumb, gaping expression funny.

"Yes, your closet. Is that alright with you?"

"Er, yes? I don't mind, but..."

"That settles it! Let's head up, then, shall we?" Mere milliseconds after I gave my consent, Lady Fisalis gleefully grabbed my hand and headed for "our" room.

I usually call it "my" room, but for the time being (and for PR purposes), it's the room me and Mr. Fisalis share. But of course... I really have it all to myself☆

My room had been tidied up while we were eating breakfast. It would be

cleaned later, so just the bed area had been dealt with, more or less. The linens had been changed and the bed remade so crisply that you couldn't even tell anyone had slept in it.

The servants have once again blown me away with their amazing work!

Lady Fisalis and I followed Dahlia through my room to my dressing room/closet. When my mother-in-law gave Dahlia a little look, Dahlia threw open the door to my closet, revealing my sizable collection of dresses. They were perfectly arranged by color with not so much as a sleeve out of place.

Surely, I don't need this many, do I? I mean, they're all obviously super expensive, what with the high grade silk and antique lace all over them. There's no way I can clean and dust in th... Whoops, I mumbled to no one but myself.

"Hmm, I see. So this is your closet," said Lady Fisalis as she waltzed right into my dressing room. She pulled gowns off the racks here and there, nodding or scowling at what she found.

As for me, I still didn't really know what her goal was, so I just watched silently. She scrutinized and inspected my wardrobe for some time before looking over her shoulder at Dahlia and asking, "Who chose these dresses?"

"It was Mimosa and I, ma'am," Dahlia replied coolly.

Ohhh, so it was you two! This is news to me, too. The dresses were already here hanging in the closet the day I arrived after the wedding. I suppose Dahlia and Mimosa must have picked them out. Well, it wasn't like Mr. Fisalis was going to pick them out himself for his show wife.

"And when was that?" Lady Fisalis continued to question Dahlia.

"It was when we were preparing for Master's wedding. The wedding dress and the dresses we presented as betrothal gifts were all commissioned at the same time," Dahlia replied, just as briskly as before. It seemed my mother-in-law had something on her mind.

"So these are all things that were made while you still didn't know her personal preferences or what kind of lady she was, then?"

"That would be correct. We did just as you said and had the tailor focus on

popular trends and wardrobe essentials, because we were not aware of Madam's own tastes," Dahlia replied after a moment of thought—perhaps taking some time to remember that day.

"While I'm sure there are things in here that look wonderful on Vi or were made after you got to know her better, other than those few items, none of this really suits her. ...That harebrained son of mine! Sometimes he really gets on my nerves," Lady Fisalis said, looking back over her shoulder again into my closet.

Those words at the end there didn't sound like anything I thought would ever fall from her lips, so I must have just imagined it. Yep, definitely an auditory hallucination.

And by "things that look wonderful on me," I assume she means the pale blue and violet dresses that were made after the wedding for the evening parties. They do look good on me, but that's because Mimosa and Madame Fleur had such a good time designing them!

I had just been standing there listening to Lady Fisalis and Dahlia's conversation that whole time, but then Lady Fisalis suddenly turned to me with a glint in her eye and said:

"You don't have to wear *any* of these dresses, Vi. You had no say in these thoughtless gifts, after all. In fact, I'd understand if you threw them out."

"If I what!?" My eyes widened in shock at her words.

Don't tell me to throw out perfectly good clothes, Mother Fisalis! I mean, it is highly unlikely I'll ever wear most of these, so they'd just go to waste one way or another, but I can't actually tell her that.

"...Which is what I'd like to say, but I'm sure that if you really did dispose of them, that you'd feel terrible about it. But a gift that doesn't come from the heart, no matter how expensive, is a pointless gift, so please do try to wear them a bit more regularly. It doesn't matter if you get them dirty—they were thoughtless gifts, after all," Lady Fisalis said with a playful smile.

Ummm. Thoughtless or not, something that's expensive is still expensive... They're not my preference, but if I don't wear them, I suppose they'll only go out

of style. Wouldn't it be practical and beneficial to wear them anyway? Yeah, it would—I'm sure it would.

I might have had to trick myself into doing it, but I still managed to come to an internal compromise. Or maybe it's more accurate to say I forced myself to compromise on this.

"Er, sure. I'll wear them whenever I can." I already have way too many clothes, so I don't know whether I really will get to wear them all, but that won't stop me from trying! ...That was a weird way to put it.

...Hmm? I wonder. Did I detect some discomfort in Mother Fisalis' voice when she said all that? Didn't she say that it was fine if I got these clothes dirty? Duchesses aren't supposed to get their dresses dirty at all, though, right...? Unless she... nope, no way... oh my gosh!?

Descending into panic, I knew that I needed some clarification from her.

"M-Mother Fisalis? What did you mean by 'getting my dresses dirty?'"

"Hm? What was that? Well, you like to garden, don't you? And you pick flowers to decorate the manor," she replied offhandedly, her head tilted adorably to the side.

Ohhh, that. She really had me scared there. I guess she did find me gardening that one time.

"So *that's* what you were talking about." I felt my shoulders relax in relief.

"Pardon me?"

"Ah, nothing," I corrected myself before I gave too much away. But my relief was short-lived.

"If you insist. Now, where were we... I've checked your closet... So now it's time to go shopping!" she exclaimed, once more surprising me with an unexpected twist.

Shopping?

"Y-You mean right now!?" It was my turn to cock my head as I looked back at her. I wondered what she was thinking, dropping that on me out of nowhere.

“Consider it a thank you for letting us stay here for so long during the war,” she said with a smile that bore a close resemblance to Mr. Fisalis’ own.

“Really? But isn’t this your home, too?”

“Ohhh, you say such sweet things, Vi! Really, it’s just an excuse to go shopping! An excuse, that’s all! I just wanted to go on a shopping spree with my daughter for once.”

I thought that what I said was utterly mundane, but she suddenly hugged me—and with gusto, too. The pressure was so intense that I’m afraid I let out a noise quite unbecoming of a young lady.

Where could she possibly be storing this much crushing force in that dainty body of hers? She’s breaking me in half!

“M-Mother Fisalis... you’re hurting me.” I gently hit against her back with my hands to try to encourage her to loosen her grip.

I’d be smacking away if this was Mr. Fisalis, but it’s important to adapt to the circumstances.

“Oh, my goodness! I’m sorry! I don’t know what came over me, oh ho ho ho! Shopping with my husband is fun, too, of course, but it’s different when it’s just us girls, right? I only had a son, and not one who would even go shopping with me, either. Really, that boy...”

It wouldn’t have been right to tell her no—besides, if I didn’t stop her, she’d just keep going on and on complaining about Mr. Fisalis. So I decided to suck it up and brace myself for some parent-child bonding time via shopping.

“Okay, I’ll go get ready.”

And that was how I ended up going on an unplanned outing that day. We got in our carriage and headed straight for, you guessed it, Madame Fleur’s boutique. She and all of her employees were already on standby when we arrived, as if they were expecting us.

Here I thought this was a spur of the moment decision, but were they all in on it!?

“It’s so good to see you again, Lady Fisalis. And how do you do, Madam

Fisalis?”

“Hee hee, it’s been so long!” My mother-in-law and Madame Fleur exchanged their hellos like a pair of old friends. I politely said hello from behind Lady Fisalis so that I didn’t get in their way. Their conversation progressed rapidly.

“You’re here today about the dresses—am I correct, Duchess?”

“Yes. Oh, but not formal ones, just something for everyday use. My apologies for such short notice, but I hope you’ll be able to help us.”

“Of course! You’re one of my most special clients, after all. Let me show you to my atelier and we can begin.”

“Thank you for understanding.”

Why is she in such a hurry to get normal clothes? Not to mention that since I didn’t know what they were talking about, I was totally left out of that conversation.

“How many will I be making?”

“Hmm. Good question. About five or six should do it. For the upcoming trip.”

Standing there and only partially paying attention to what they were saying, I thought I heard my mother-in-law mention a trip.

Huh? Who’s going on a trip? Where?

Oh, I get it. She came to have some clothes made. She and Lord Fisalis must be going on a fun little getaway before they go home. They’d like that, considering how lovey-dovey they are. But five or six outfits still seems like a lot!

I wonder if she’ll be headed back to the territory soon, and that’s why she put in the rush request. I hadn’t heard about anything like that, though. Hopefully she’ll tell me later. Yeah, I’m sure she will!

As I took the liberty of coming up with my own explanation, I tuned back in to what they were saying.

“Oh, I see. In that case, something not too voluminous and easy to move in should be good.”

“Exactly. And then as for the time frame, I think the departure date is in two

or three days, so I'd like everything two days from now. That really doesn't leave you much time, does it? I'm sorry to ask this of you."

Lady Fisalis might be smiling sweetly, but that's a hellish deadline to put on someone! I thought that Madame's dresses typically take six months to make! Can she really make them in just two days? ...Only a fiend would ask her to do that.

Still, it's got to be impossible to say no to such a beautiful smile. And if you're aware of that, Mother Fisalis, you absolutely are a little devil, I thought to myself as I looked at my mother-in-law in astonishment.

What came out of Madame Fleur's mouth next, however, caused me to freeze in place.

"No, my pleasure! Oh ho ho! My word, though, what a tight deadline! I had better get started right away. Please, come inside. I'll do my very best to make sure everything is to your liking, Viola," Madame quipped, pulling a cheerful smile out of... somewhere, despite the insane deadline thrust on her.

But.

Hey, wait a second! Were they talking about me!? The dresses are being made... For me!?

I... I think I'm hyperventilating.

12 — Getting Ready for a Trip, I Guess

“Madame just has an odd way of speaking... I thought for sure these dresses were for Mother Fisalis...” I grumbled to myself in a low voice.

Someone please, please smack me to clear my head. I thought we came here to pick out clothes for Lady Fisalis!

What does it all mean—buying the clothes for me and then saying that I’m going on a trip in two or three days!? This is completely out of nowhere! Even worse than nowhere—I don’t know where it came from whatsoever! Where am I going? Who am I going with? Where am I? Who am I?

...Oh, wait, different crisis.

Regardless, I haven’t got a clue what’s going on!

At some point while I was grumbling to myself, Madame Fleur and Lady Fisalis had gone into the shop.

Oh, and now they’ve left me behind.

It was weird to be standing alone there on the street, so I quickly followed them inside. The dressmaker didn’t have much time, so work began right away and proceeded at a swift clip.

While an employee took my measurements, Lady Fisalis, Madame, and Stellaria (who came with me that day) finalized plans for the designs.

“But I was just measured recently,” I protested, but to no avail.

“That was several months ago already. We’ll be taking your measurements again so we can make clothes that fit you like a second skin,” Madame said with a sweet smile I simply couldn’t defy. And just like that, my clothes were peeled off all the way down to my underwear.

This is going to be embarrassing no matter how many times I do it.

Madame has also switched to calling me by my first name—she must’ve realized I didn’t react to “duchess.” This way I can’t possibly think she’s talking

about Lady Fisalis. That's right—these are dresses for me!

Dahlia, Stellaria, and Madame Fleur quickly came to an agreement on the designs while I was being measured.

You're not going to make another frilly, sparkly thing made with pricey materials, right? These are going to be everyday clothes, right? You said I need to be able to move around in them, since I'm going on a trip, right? I thought nervously as I watched and waited on them.

"Since Vi here is still so young, I think the skirts should fall about to the knee," suggested Lady Fisalis.

"I agree. Too short is just as bad as too long, but knee length will still show off her legs. don't you agree?"

"Yes. Ria, what are some of the fashionable looks in Rozhe right now?"

"Well, ma'am, the young ladies are wearing..."

The three of them were huddled together discussing something that was apparently very serious. When I took a look at what they came up with, I was surprised to see that the designs they had prepared actually looked like things I wanted to wear! The dresses featured simple silhouettes just like the ones I usually wore around the manor. Every outfit sported a knee-length skirt, just as Lady Fisalis had mentioned, and they were more reminiscent of simple house dresses than evening gowns. It really felt like they'd distilled every current trend into these beautiful designs.

I'm not in the know when it comes to fashion, so did they come up with all this just based on what Stellaria told them?

"The dainty flower pattern isn't too loud, either, but I thought something a bit cuter might suit her more. What do you think, my lady, Madame?"

"Hmm, yes. The skirt features simple lines, so I think a different pattern on the fabric might be better, too!"

"I couldn't agree more, Lady Fisalis. And if her white petticoat was visible just below the hem, that could work as an accent color."

It sounds like they're going to make a dress with a floral pattern. I haven't

worn any like that yet!

When I peeked over at the sketch in Madame Fleur's hands, I saw a simple and rather charming dress. I could tell that they'd taken Stellaria's input into consideration.

"Alright then! Let's start there, with outfit number one!"

"As you wish. Deliver this to the atelier."

"Yes, ma'am."

Madame Fleur handed off the rough sketch to an employee once she had received the go-ahead from Lady Fisalis. Now that the color and design of the fabric were settled, the sketches were rushed up to the inner atelier for the cutting and sewing to begin.

That's no surprise, considering how tight the deadline is.

"On to the next one!" said Lady Fisalis excitedly, unable to wait a moment longer for the next design.

"Yes, the next one..."

And so the three of them put their heads together again and began to brainstorm ideas until they came up with the next design.

Midway through our lunch break, the designs for six outfits were finally completed. Lady Fisalis, Madame Fleur, and even Stellaria seemed satisfied. Their smiles clearly read, "Nice work, everyone☆"

While everyone besides me was glowing with a sense of accomplishment, I came to a surprising realization.

This was Madame's shop. And she was a high-end brand, so she came with a high-end price tag.

...I started to tremble in fear at the thought of paying for... Six. Whole. Outfits.

But if it gets out to everyone else here that I have money anxiety, it would affect the Fisalis family's reputation, so I can't let anything slip. Just what I need—a second thing to worry about!

As I internally screamed in panic, Lady Fisalis and Madame Fleur continued

their mysterious conversation about the upcoming “trip.”

“Your deadline is just a tad challenging, but it will make for good practice. Thank you kindly for your cooperation, Lady Fisalis. I don’t know where I’d be without your regular patronage.”

“Oh, no, the pleasure is all mine. I’m glad I was able to have such a nice chat with you.”

What was that? What practice? And what nice chat!?

I was staring blankly in confusion at them, completely unable to follow the conversation and still stunned from my earlier panic. But Madame Fleur and Lady Fisalis only plowed ahead with their conversation as question marks whirled around my head.

“My apprentices might have been the ones doing the sewing, but they were going by my sketches. Those sketches are very precise, so please don’t worry yourself over it. I’ll also supervise things myself, of course,” explained Madame.

“Your apprentices? They have my full confidence, then. Of greater concern to me, though... I know you gave it a thorough looking-over, but are you sure you only want to charge one-tenth of your usual rate?”

“Of course. It’s almost *too* much to ask after you were so much help in training my apprentices. They’re all very eager to tailor clothes for Viola when she’s at the height of her influence!”

They’re grinning at each other! But more importantly, just how good is business that Madame actually has all these apprentices!? And who the heck thinks I’m influencing anyone!?

Uh, ahem, ahem.

Anyway, moving on.

Going off what they said, the sewing will be done by Madame’s apprentices, so that’s why it’s unusually cheap. But then again, I’m not sure how much it normally costs to start with. Maybe I should think of this as helping with the apprentices’ development? Yeah, that’s what I’ll do! Positive thinking! Once I came to that conclusion, some of the tension left my body.

“But Viola seems so close to the duke, and they get along so well. I’m always seeing her smiling.”

“That’s true. But oh, that boy... He told *me* to choose some clothes for Vi for this trip.”

“Goodness! Well it is certainly kind of you to do so!”

“Oh ho ho ho!” Lady Fisalis and Madame Fleur continued to chat idly, completely ignoring me.

They’d said something about Mr. Fisalis, but I didn’t pay any attention to that. *It’s probably not anything important.*

As their conversation wound down, Lady Fisalis began to gather her things to go home.

Looks like we’re done for the day.

I stood, too, when Lady Fisalis rose from her seat.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, then, Madame. Come along, Vi.”

“Oh, yes, coming!”

“The two of you take care.”

We were shown out by Madame Fleur and a clearly smaller number of employees than were there when we arrived. Lady Fisalis and I then headed out to our carriage.

No sooner had we gotten into it than Lady Fisalis dropped another surprise on me.

“Next on the agenda is... shoes, I suppose,” she said, after considering my feet for a moment.

Wha...? How do you still have the energy for more shopping!? I wonder why she’s bringing me along for this one, too.

“Shoes for you, Mother Fisalis? Do you have a favorite store for those, too?” I asked, looking for some clarification.

“Huh? Nooo, they’re obviously for you, Vi!” she pouted adorably.

I should have known.

But I already have tons of shoes in my closet. Ones still in their boxes that I haven't even opened yet. I'm not even sure I'll ever wear them all. I bet if I looked hard enough, I could dig some shoes suitable for a trip out of all that.

I should probably just come out and say it...

"Oh, I have lots of shoes already! I don't need any more!" I told my mother-in-law, trying to appeal to reason.

"You do? Ah, what a shame. Then again, we spent more time at Madame Fleur's than I anticipated, so new shoes will have to wait. Let's have some sweets and then head straight home instead."

She gave up surprisingly quickly. Thank goodness.

"That sounds like a great idea!" I agreed. We went not to another store, but to the confectioner's Mr. Fisalis and I had been to. There, we got ourselves some cakes, thus marking the end of our little outing.

Although I'd heard there was often a long line at that particular cafe, I hadn't had to wait either time I visited—not with Mr. Fisalis, nor with my mother-in-law. We were shown right to our table, where we took our time enjoying our treats. We took so much time, in fact, that by the time we got home it was nearly evening. Mr. Fisalis and Lord Fisalis, however, had not yet returned.

"I had a wonderful time today! I just knew you'd make the perfect daughter! We should do this again sometime."

"Sure. Thank you for taking me along!"

I parted ways with Lady Fisalis at the front door. She returned to the cottage, and I made a beeline for my room.

Just let me relax for a little while!

And with that, I threw my etiquette to the wind and cannonballed onto my sofa. I landed on the cushions with a muffled *thwump* and sunk in, letting the day's exhaustion seep out of my body.

Being a good daughter is really draining! Now that I think about it, I never went shopping like that with my own mother. The only place I ever went with

her was the market. We just bought vegetables and basic household stuff; a mother-daughter shopping spree was completely out of our budget, I mused as I settled in, hugging my pillow to my chest.

“Are you tired?” Dahlia asked, with a stiff smile.

“No... well, maybe a little. I was just so sure I was tagging along with Lady Fisalis on one of *her* personal shopping trips.”

“Were you not expecting to buy clothes for yourself today, Madam?”

“...Did you know about this?”

“Yes, more or less,” she replied nonchalantly.

Everyone must have heard about Lady Fisalis’ plans from the guards. I was the only one who didn’t know. Maybe “I was the only one who wasn’t told” is more accurate, though...

“And now I find out that I’m apparently going on a trip. Surprise, surprise,” I rambled on into the pillow, only my eyes peeking out from above it.

I still didn’t know what it was supposed to mean, so I said it like it was just a rumor I’d heard floating around. *Not to mention I’m pretty miffed that I wasn’t informed about what was going on. Rohtas, Dahlia, absolutely nobody told me about anything! It feels like I’m being intentionally left out of the loop! It’s not nice to exclude people. I’m totally frowning behind this pillow, even if no one can see it!*

“Goodness, Madam. I think you’ll understand what the trip is all about shortly,” Dahlia said with a gentle smile, sensing that I was a bit upset.

Just as I thought—Dahlia knows something.

“Shortly?”

“Yes, Madam.”

“Hmm?” *I’ll understand shortly, she says. So, that means soon. I might have a vague idea what it could be...*

As I laid on the sofa, thinking, there was a commotion downstairs. A maid stuck her head around the door, saying, “Master has just come home, Madam.”

He's home a little early, which should have been expected after he left saying that he's "going to give one-hundred fifty percent." Looks like he made good on his promise. Actually, maybe it was Father Fisalis who got them home earlier than usual.

"I'll be there in a minute!"

I laid the pillow on the sofa, tidied up my hair and skirt a little, and headed to the foyer. When I made it downstairs, I found Mr. Fisalis talking to Rohtas like usual. Father Fisalis was nowhere to be seen.

Judging from his demeanor this morning, I'm guessing he went straight back to the cottage.

"Welcome home, Mr. Fisalis!"

"It's good to be back, Viola." He must have been tired from work, but he still managed to flash me a radiant smile when I rushed over to greet him.

How does he manage that? I'm dead tired and I just went out shopping. Hmph, hot people have it so easy! ...Ah, I guess I'm still in complaining mode.

Er, I'll just keep all that to myself.

"You must have worked very hard today."

"Yeah, I worked especially hard because I wanted to come home early! And now that my work's all taken care of, I can start my vacation the day after tomorrow."

"That's great!"

I know Mr. Fisalis seemed really happy to tell me that, but... his vacation is starting the day after tomorrow? He did just say that, right? But didn't Lady Fisalis also say that the departure date for my trip is the day after tomorrow, too? If your vacation also starts the day after tomorrow...

Hang on.

The last piece of the puzzle fell into place.

"Did you have a good time shopping with Mother?"

"I did."

“Oh, that’s good! I had asked her to choose some clothes for you to take on our trip over my break.”

Ah ha. So I’m going with him! I didn’t think he was the type to tell me to just take the servants with me! Yeah, he’d never say something like that.

I was right.

That vague idea had become clearer.

13 — The Purpose of the Trip (and Where We Were Going)

I thought it might be possible... ever so slightly possible... but yes, it seems like I'm going on the trip with Mr. Fisalis. I wonder where we're going—and why we're going. And why just the two of us. Wait, maybe Mother and Father Fisalis are going, too?

Personally, I'd prefer if the two of us had some company.

I mean, I can take care of myself just fine, but I've never had to look after Mr. Fisalis before all by myself, and I'm not sure I'm up to the task. Well... I've taken care of my little brother and sister before, though, and I was fine with them.

Mr. Fisalis and I have been spending more and more time together lately, but... fourteen days in a row! That's nuts! That's completely unexplored territory! We've never spent that much time together, so I bet we'll run out of things to talk about pretty quickly.

This will be my first time going on a trip, too, so I think it might be a good idea to come up with an itinerary or something together, but I wonder if Mr. Fisalis will agree with me on that. He really does seem to like surprises... springing something on me out of the blue is a regular occurrence at this point. Well, whatever happens, happens, I guess.

There were so many thoughts running through my head that I struggled to hold them all in as I waited for Mr. Fisalis to say something. When he finally did speak, he asked, "Will you be able to finish packing by tomorrow evening?"

What. That's the first thing out of your mouth? Telling me to pack!? Hold up just one minute! First of all, where are we going, and why? Aren't those normally the first things you'd tell someone?

Ahem.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

This is nothing new. Everything is fine. This is his normal.

“Umm, packing aside, could you tell me where it is we’re going? No one’s told me anything at all yet...” I asked him after taking a deep breath to calm my nerves.

“Oh! That was careless of me. I didn’t realize no one had told you. We’re going to my duchy. I’m sorry for making you wait until now, but I thought this could count as our honeymoon. The plan is to visit our main territories, so that way we’ll be able to relax. It’s not even that far from Rozhe,” he explained with a smile that totally said, “Oopsie, I forgot to tell you where we’re even going~”

“Huh? Honeymoon?”

“Yeah. So much stuff has been happening that I wasn’t able to take you earlier.”

So much stuff? Stuff? Ohhh, that stuff. There were SO. MANY. THINGS. That happened, but I guess he just summarized them all as “stuff.” Argh, this man. But I guess that’s just par for the course with him.

“Oh... I never assumed we were going to have a honeymoon at all, so I wasn’t upset or anything.”

“...You know, it physically pains me to hear you say that... But I can kind of understand where you’re coming from. At any rate, since we’re only getting to it now, our honeymoon is also going to be an opportunity to inspect our territories.”

So, at long last, the destination is revealed. And it’s the duchy? Well, whatever. I’m just glad I won’t have to wait until that morning to find out where I’m going.

But wait. It’s also technically going to be our honeymoon!?

I’m going on an actual honeymoon!

I did a double take when Mr. Fisalis uttered the words I never dreamed in a million years I’d hear. Going on a trip to your new family’s home territory after your wedding is a common enough honeymoon—or perhaps they’d call it a postnuptial expedition or something—among the nobility. The implied purpose

is showing your bride the state of your lands, and some nobles even throw a banquet while they are there. But in our case, we had left that out since our marriage was contractual at first.

Actually, I didn't think that was even an option. But now he says we are, in fact, going on a honeymoon?

"Thank you," I replied, grateful to finally know where I was going.

"So, do you think you'll be ready in time?" he asked again.

I hmmm'd to myself in my head. *Clothes—several changes of them, actually—and what else do I need? This is my first time going on any sort of big trip, so I've got no clue how to pack. But once I tell Dahlia that, it shouldn't be a problem. I'm more worried about the clothes that are being made for me.*

"Um, it's going to depend on the clothes that are being made for me. I made a really big order today." *Six whole outfits! Can they really finish that many in one day? ...I actually feel like if anyone could, it would be them.*

You know what? I won't think about it anymore.

"In that case, is there anything else you need to pack?"

"That's what I'm wondering." *Yeah, did I even bring a travel bag or anything with me?*

—

Mr. Fisalis went to work the next day, too. He said he still had a few loose ends to tie up. As I was seeing him off in the foyer, like I usually did, he said, "I'm coming home after lunch today. Oh, but you don't have to wait for me before you eat," glancing at me with a particular look in his eye.

"Sure thing! You never have to worry about me waiting for you!" I replied with a smile.

He seemed a bit upset by my answer, for some reason.

You were the one who said not to wait for you. Weirdo. Oh, but since we have lunch in the main dining room, maybe I should wait for him?

—

“As for my clothes, the outfits I’m having made should be plenty. That just leaves underwear, nightgowns... Oh, Mimosa. Would you hand me the box with my jewelry in it?”

“Here you are. Ah, Miss Stellaaaaria. What about shoes? I don’t know what the outfits you commissioned look like, so I’m not sure what will match.”

“You called me ‘miss’ *again*, Mimosa.”

“Oops! Sorry!”

“...But, yes, shoes. Choose ones with low heels that are easy to walk in, to start with. We’ll see what colors look best later.”

“Understood!”

Stellaria and Mimosa were happily, but quickly, getting my things together for the trip in my dressing room. Mimosa was feeling well that day, so she was helping out. This being my first time packing for a trip, I would’ve been utterly confused without them there.

Considering the times I’d visited my own family’s territory, my travel experience wasn’t exactly zero. But our earldom, barren though it was, was only a half-day’s ride from the capital by carriage. You could even leave and return on the same day if you went on horseback (Father actually does this a lot). And when we did visit our lands, we stayed in a second home we kept there—although it was even more humble than our regular one. At any rate, I had never needed to pack a bag or anything before.

Stellaria and Mimosa made quick work of their choosing and packing as I lost myself deep in thought.

When did they get together my nightgowns and underwear? It’s like they pulled them out of thin air!

They’d hand-picked some jewelry for me too, ranging from my basic pieces to some things a little more extravagant.

I’m the one going, and yet I haven’t had a chance to get even a single word in edgewise about anything. Or rather, they’ve never given me a chance. Mimosa’s always been like that, but it sure seems like you’re the same way, Stellaria!

I hadn't been sure that I owned a travel bag, but something suitable for that purpose had also magically appeared between them. It was a leather trunk in a lovely shade of old rose. Although the color was dainty, it seemed solid and looked like it could hold even my biggest items for the trip.

Wow, I bet I could even pack myself in that thing. Well, on second thought... with the amount of stuff I'm bringing, I definitely wouldn't fit!

The things Mimosa and Stellaria had pulled from my closet were quickly being jammed inside. It didn't look like my shoes were going to fit, though, so they packed those into a separate trunk—one that was just for shoes!

Once they were nearly finished packing my luggage, Dahlia looked over everything that Stellaria and Mimosa had packed and said, "Stellaria and Master's personal maid will be going with you on the trip as well. They will look after you, so don't hesitate to call on either of them if the need arises."

Ah, so it won't be just the maids who work at our destination villa—we're bringing some from here, too. It's reassuring to know I'll be with people who know me so well.

"So Stellaria will be with me, then! Got it. I should have guessed that Mimosa wouldn't be able to travel. Bellis would murder me if I tried to drag her along..." I muttered the last bit so only Dahlia could hear it. She smiled in agreement.

Yikes! The fact that she had the same thought is terrifying.

"Wehhh, Madam! I wanted to go with you, too!" Mimosa cried at Dahlia's explanation, her big hazel eyes shining with tears as she looked at me. But I, for one, valued my life! ...Er, that's not what I meant to say!

"I wanted you to go too, Mimosa. But I hope you understand why you can't this time. You should take this time to rest up a bit. You could even hang around the greenhouse!" I told her, trying to make her feel better.

I hope all of the servants can take it easy while their master is away, too. They'll still be at the manor, but I wonder... will it feel like a vacation for them? Or maybe it'll just be like employees restocking when there aren't any customers. But without us around the manor, maybe they could even go home to their families if they wanted to.

At this point, Dahlia chimed in again.

“Ah, Madam. I haven’t informed you yet, but the former duke and duchess will be at the manor while you are away.”

“Huh? They’ll be here? They’re not going with us on the trip?” I nonchalantly asked. *And here I thought they’d be going back home to the territory with us.*

Stellaria and Mimosa abruptly stopped their packing. A feeling like something had snapped fell over the three of us.

“...Your parents don’t normally go with you on your honeymoon, Madam.”

“Oh. Oh, yeah...”

Dahlia cleared her throat once, dispelling the awkwardness. And thank goodness she did—it felt like time had stopped.

“The former duke and duchess have offered to oversee the manor while you and Master are on your trip.”

“Oh, I see.”

I then thought to myself, *Ah, well, I guess I won’t really be alone with Mr. Fisalis if both Stellaria and Rosa are there, too*, only to have Dahlia announce:

“The former duke and duchess may not be going, but Rohtas will be, this time.”

“What!? Rohtas is going, too?” My eyes widened in surprise.

But he’s the butler! Can the manor’s cornerstone just up and leave for two whole weeks? It’s no exaggeration to say that the Fisalis manor revolves around him! If Rohtas is gone for two weeks...

[some speculation omitted for brevity]

Oh, I’ve been caught off guard again!

I don’t know if my reaction was funny or something, but Dahlia snickered at me.

“Indeed, he is. Your trip will double as a tour of the Duke’s territories. Most of your trip shall be spent in the largest one, but the Fisalis family has enclaves and exclaves all over, as well, and you are scheduled to tour those, too. I have the

feeling that Master wants you to see his territories firsthand, so this trip will count as part of your education and Rohtas will be joining you as your teacher,” she explained, finally allowing me to understand the actual point of the trip.

So, instead of more complicated lectures and study fatigue— Er I mean, study... intrigue?—they’re taking me on a field trip, then! That definitely sounds better for me. That explains why Rohtas is coming, too. Okie dokie, it’s all crystal clear now!

But I still feel some hesitation about bringing someone as important as Rohtas with us. That would just leave the general servants here—they wouldn’t be able to work to their full potential without their conductor, right?

“Won’t it be an issue if Rohtas is absent?” He covers a lot of ground with his work, after all. There’s clerical work, financial management, and I’m sure tons of other things, too. I just don’t know exactly what they all are.

“Cartham will be fine stocking the pantry on his own for a time, and I will handle the rest. Of course, Lord Fisalis will be present, too, should anything unexpected arise,” Dahlia said with a smile and a nod, dispelling my worries.

Oh, that’s right! As long as Dahlia is around, I have nothing to worry about. Not only is she a veteran, but she has a thorough understanding of the manor, second only to Rohtas. I can rely on Cartham, too, in a pinch.

I feel kind of bad, though, leaving my in-laws to house-sit, but I should probably not let it bother me right now.

“Oh? I feel better knowing that!” I exclaimed. But it’s not just Dahlia I’ll be relying on. I just realized, Cartham and Bellis will be here, too!

Just when I thought I understood everything, though:

“However...” Dahlia said with reservation, seemingly at a loss for words.

“However?” What could it be?

“Lord Fisalis is very eager to stand in for Rohtas as the butler in his absence...” she said with a stiff smile.

Huh, it’s pretty easy to imagine my father-in-law getting super worked up about that.

“Oh, is that so? Well, how could I deny him that if he’s so excited? I bet he knows just as much about the manor and whatnot as Rohtas!”

Given what I’ve seen of Lord Fisalis, he does seem like the type who would get a kick out of putting on silver-rimmed glasses and a black tailcoat and doing a Rohtas cosplay!

14 — Mr. Fisalis' Room

We'd been running around the house getting ready to flee— I mean, getting ready for vacation, and Dahlia had finally explained the point of the trip. Before we knew it, it was past lunch time. A maid came to get me at my regular lunch time, but it didn't feel right to stop the job mid-way through, so I put off my lunch until later in favor of packing. Besides, Stellaria and Mimosa were the ones doing most of the work! I could never be so cruel as to abandon them just to go eat lunch.

While we were packing, a message from Madame Fleur arrived saying that the clothes commissioned for me would be delivered that evening.

They really must have been firing on all cylinders or something... I'm really grateful to them, though. I'll be sure to actually use these clothes, not like the other ones I ignored.

My luggage was quickly packed away into the suitcase under Stellaria's command. All that was left was to pack the new outfits when they arrived from Madame's boutique.

"That should do it," Stellaria said with a satisfied grin, dusting off her hands with a brisk clapping motion.

"You did splendidly! Thanks so much. I've never packed for a long trip before, so I'd probably have no idea what to do if you two weren't here." I gazed, impressed, at my luggage in all its tightly-packed glory. The clothes and shoes pulled out from the deepest corners of my closet had been neatly put away in the suitcase (and accompanying shoe trunk). Clearly the work of a true professional.

Lemme get a good look... so I can steal your secret technique for myself.

Mr. Fisalis came home from work just as we were finally headed downstairs to the dining room for lunch. To be more accurate, the front door opened at the exact moment we were on our way down the staircase.

“Master has just returned home, Madam,” Rohtas called, when he caught sight of me.

“Is it that late already? Welcome home, Mr. Fisalis!” I greeted him as I hurried down the stairs.

Now that I think of it, though, Mr. Fisalis did say this morning when he left that he’d be back after lunch. I told him I’d eat lunch before he got home, too, but now it looks like I’ve waited for him without meaning to!

“Thanks, Viola, I’m glad to be home. I finished work right on schedule today. Now I can officially start my vacation tomorrow,” he smiled, clearly in a good mood and very excited about his vacation.

“I’m glad to hear all your work is done—I know you’ve been working really hard. Er, I was just about to have lunch. Would you care to join me?” I asked him, hoping to avoid wasting the servants’ time by making them prepare and wait on two separate lunches. The sudden thought of having to eat lunch all alone made me a little blue, too, to be honest.

I should consider this a bonus: I get to avoid eating alone! Oh, but Mr. Fisalis might have already eaten at work. It’s way past when most people have lunch.

Mr. Fisalis beamed at my invitation. *Guess he’s in an even better mood, now.*

“Don’t tell me... you waited for me to come home, Viola?” he asked with tears in his dark brown eyes.

That’s *what you think I did?*

“No, I’ve just been so busy packing for the trip that I didn’t have the chance. I was going to go eat now so that Cartham won’t scold me for keeping him from cleaning up... Um, is everything alright, Mr. Fisalis?”

The light from Mr. Fisalis’ eyes vanished in an instant and his head hung heavily when I told him the truth. But then, shoulders still slumped, he mumbled something like, “Oh, I see. Of course. That makes sense...”

“Mr. Fisalis?” I couldn’t hear him very well, so I stepped closer and wiped around his eyes with the cuff of my sleeve, gazing at him.

“It’s nothing. My eyes are just, uh, sweating a little, is all. It was very bright

out,” he replied with a forced smile.

As I was eating some fruit for dessert after my delicious lunch with Mr. Fisalis, the conversation turned to our trip preparations.

“So, are you all packed, Viola?”

“Yes, more or less, but Stellaria and Mimosa helped. Once my clothes from Madame’s arrive later today, then we’ll be totally done.” *Her message said they wouldn’t be delivered until this evening, so we have more than enough time to finish the other prep work.*

Mr. Fisalis listened quietly, but with a smile, as I filled him in, but then out of nowhere he suggested, “In that case, I’d better pack my own things this afternoon. Oh, I know—why don’t you help me?”

Wha—? Did he seriously just ask me to help him pack? I couldn’t even pack my own bags by myself, and now he wants me to help with his! Oh, wait... he must not know that I didn’t pack my own. But, no, that’s something he should tell his maid to do!

Hmm, I’m letting myself get too worked up about this. My sincere apologies.

I blinked in surprise and did a double-take before staring long and hard at Mr. Fisalis.

“When I say help, I just mean helping me pick my outfits. I wouldn’t make you do the maid’s job or anything like that,” he added with a laugh, correctly interpreting my surprise.

Whoops. Got ahead of myself, I suppose. So he wants me to coordinate vacation looks for him? I’m going to have to give that a coordi-nay.

Oh gosh, I can’t believe I actually just thought of a dad joke that embarrassing.

This is uncharted territory. I’m entering the danger zone. And the presence of mind I had earlier has gone totally AWOL. I can’t even choose what I’m gonna wear, and he wants me to choose for him. He’s asking for the impossible.

“For example, back when we went shopping together, the clothes you selected were rather nice. You always look so stylish yourself, too, and you

choose accessories that look good with all your clothes,” he said, showering me with praise—who could say why—as my cheek twitched furiously.

You mean... whatever Mimosa put on me that day looks stylish. And as for that time you and I went shopping together, I chose those pieces on the spur of the moment. And I wasn't picking based on my good taste—they were just the safest choices in the store!

And any personal taste you think went into my casual clothes was actually Mimosa having the time of her life choosing clothes for me, so it was her style you love so much! I'm basically her dress-up doll, from head to toe! My preferred look is my maid's uniform.

Great, now he's gonna find out that I'm a tasteless yokel! ...But then again, do I really care if he does? ☆

It's not like I can take Stellaria and Mimosa with me to help him get ready, either. That would only make his own maids feel bad about their work. Hmm, what to do? Having to pick outfits for him with absolutely no warning is just setting the bar too high.

As I tried to come up with a plan of action for Mr. Fisalis' sudden request, I spotted his maids out of the corner of my eye. I hadn't noticed them before because they were waiting demurely behind him, but they smiled and flashed me a line of discrete thumbs-up.

Ohhh! They're encouraging me. Everything will be okay. They've got my back!

“I don't know if I'll be of any help, but sure,” I answered reluctantly.

“We can get to work while we have our tea in my room, then. Bring the tea set to my room,” Mr. Fisalis directed Dahlia.

“As you wish, Master.”

Now that I think of it, this will be my first time going into Mr. Fisalis' room. During those unavoidable times where we shared a room, we always slept in mine. I know I always say “my room,” too, but it's officially the “master bedroom.” I just keep forgetting.

Mr. Fisalis' office was right next to my bedroom, and his own bedroom was on

the other side of it. When we parted ways before going to bed, the door to his room was as far as I'd go. I hadn't ever actually gone inside.

Even during my cleaning and decorating, that area is out of my jurisdiction.

"Please, come in," Mr. Fisalis said as he suavely opened the door and ushered me in.

"Thank you," I replied as I stepped into his room.

The bedroom's chic color palette was completely unlike my own. Although it seemed like poor manners, I couldn't help but curiously wander around, looking at this and that.

The room is a bit smaller than mine, but it doesn't feel cramped at all. I decorate my room with flowers and handmade throw pillows, which give it a bright and natural feeling, but in contrast, all the furniture here is dark wood and very refined. It definitely makes the space feel calm. It really does read as a man's room—not a hint of cuteness here. His bed is narrower than mine, too, but it could still easily sleep three people. My bed could fit five or six—meaning I've somehow managed to have both a bigger room and a bigger bed than the actual head of the house. I feel like I should apologize or something.

Anyway. Putting aside my feelings of guilt (not like it really matters anyway)...

"Oh, right. This is your first time in my room," Mr. Fisalis commented when he noticed me poking around. "Sorry it's so gloomy in here," he continued with a bit of a snicker.

"Gloomy? Not at all. I was thinking that it's very refined, actually."

"You think so? I know—how about you make a throw pillow for something for me? It's sad my room doesn't have something you made that's *only* for my room."

What did he emphasize "only" like that for? Hmm, maybe it's because this is the only room left untouched?

"Sure, if you'd like one."

"I'd love one. I can't wait to see it." We solidified our pillow plans as he led me to a door in the back of his room.

“I think if you choose five or six outfits from here for me to take, that should be good.”

“Yeah...”

He opened the door to reveal a dressing room much smaller than mine, but still amply sized and elegant, nonetheless. Although I was already feeling overwhelmed, I looked at the clothes hanging there one by one; everything from the handsome formal wear he wore at parties to outfits for his days off were hanging in long, neat rows.

His knight's uniform is here, too, of course. Is this the spare for when the other is being washed? He's got quite a few things in black, white, navy, and blue—more than half of his whole wardrobe, it looks like. Maybe these are his favorite colors to wear. So, I've got to choose from what's in here...

I had just paused, a bit puzzled about how to start, when Mr. Fisalis' maids marched into the dressing room with such gusto and pomp that they might as well have been leading the king himself through town.

“Pardon us!”

“I have Master's bag here.”

“Let's start by collecting the smaller items!”

Oh, thank god! Perfect timing, ladies!

Mr. Fisalis and I stepped out of the dressing room to get out of their way. We were then guided over to a supremely comfortable sofa, where I took a seat next to him. The tea Dahlia had prepared was waiting for us there. I watched the maids scurry around, this time with Mr. Fisalis by my side, as I helped myself to some tea.

Wooow, I should have known his maids are packing pros, too! It looks like his luggage is the same style as mine, just in a different color. Mine's a lovely shade of pink, whereas his is a chic black.

The maids quickly pulled pajamas, underclothes, and other necessities from Mr. Fisalis' dressing room with practiced ease and efficiency and packed them into the suitcase.

Compared to Mimosa and Stellaria who, despite taking the task seriously, clearly enjoyed deciding what shoes and jewelry to pair with what outfit—and had the time to do so—Mr. Fisalis’ maids don’t seem to have that luxury... and they don’t look like they’re having fun, either. I think they’re doing just as good of a job, though.

Once they were mostly done packing the basics, the maids moved on to selecting and packing outfits for Mr. Fisalis to wear.

“What do you think of these pants with this shirt and this jacket?”

“Oh, how handsome! I think they look great together. And that shirt from earlier would match those pants, too.”

“Could he wear the shirt untucked for a more casual look, too?”

“Yes, it’ll look wonderful in a more relaxed style, too.”

“And boots would go well with these breeches, don’t you think? And loafers with these pants? I’ll go ahead and pack your deck shoes, too.”

“Those all sound like good ideas.”

The maids picked out pieces one by one and brought them to me to ask for my opinion. And of course I said yes to all of them! They had great eyes for fashion! By all appearances, I was choosing outfits for Mr. Fisalis, even though I wasn’t choosing anything at all.

Mr. Fisalis, for his part, drank his tea elegantly—and most importantly, without butting into our very important work—listening to the maids and me as we decided what he would wear. The maids then packed everything, one item after the other, into his black travel bag.

Hmm, with the maids doing most of the work, it feels more like I just came to his room for tea.

15 — And Off We Went!

My clothes from Madame Fleur's arrived around the time Mr. Fisalis' packing was completed (by the maids). It was already late afternoon—packing his bag had taken a lot more time than I'd realized.

All I've done today is pack, I mused to myself as he and I walked down to the salon.

"I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting. I've completed everything you ordered. I'd like to do some last-minute adjustments, so might you put them on for me?" The fact that Madame delivered the outfits *herself* made me feel even more awkward and fussed over.

"Sure."

"You can try them on in your room, perhaps, Madam," suggested Stellaria, who was holding the box the clothes were in.

Just as we, Madame, Stellaria, and I, went to head back upstairs to fine-tune the fits, Mr. Fisalis asked, grinning that radiant smile of his, "Don't forget to show *me* the dresses, too, once you have them on. Oh, right. It'd be a hassle to come down to the salon each time, so I'll wait in my room!"

It makes no difference to me if I go to the salon or your room. I don't particularly want to go to ei— Er, nevermind. I almost said too much, there.

But, no, he's right. He's the one who paid for them, so I have no room to refuse. Plus, he showed me that gorgeous smile! That itself is more than I deserve.

"Um... okay..." I bashfully replied, giving him all that I could muster, which was only a one dollar smile.

And thus, my final check, aka. fashion show, began. As I put on each outfit in my room, Madame checked the sizing before I went to Mr. Fisalis' room and did a little turn for him.

“That one looks more like a frock or a tunic than a dress. I like it better that way. I think it suits you.”

“Thank you.”

“Why don’t you try on the next one, Miss Viola?” Madame suggested.

“Alright,” I agreed and went back to my own room, where I changed into the next and the next and the...

[portions of the proceedings omitted for brevity].

This whole production—this showing every outfit to Mr. Fisalis—feels like overkill, but I’ll go along with it since it seems like he’s enjoying himself.

—

“I’m so glad that they all look great on you, Viola! Asking Madame to make them was the right decision.”

“Why, thank you, Duke Fisalis,” Madame replied with a smile and bow.

Mr. Fisalis then rose to compare my newly completed outfits, all neatly hung up on a rack.

“Hmm, yes, this will work very well. You’ll be tired tomorrow after traveling all day, so something with a more comfortable fit would be best,” he muttered to himself, taking each dress off the rack one at a time and holding them up to me. He was choosing the outfit for me to wear the next day from the selection that Madame made for me... but it’s not like I actually asked.

“What do you think of this one, Duke? I designed it for maximum freedom of movement.”

“I like it. What about you, Vi?”

“I think it’s fine.” *Hey, if you’re gonna decide for me what I’m going to wear, why can’t you decide for yourself what you’re going to wear?* I didn’t say this out loud, of course... but boy, did I complain on the inside.

Once the perfectly-fitted clothes were packed away in my bag, our preparation for the trip was complete at last. The next day, we would finally leave.

I woke up at my usual time, but had a lighter breakfast at an earlier time than usual. When I made my way to the foyer once I was all ready, all of the servants were there waiting for me.

“Have a wonderful time on your trip, Madam!” they said in unison.

“Thank you all in advance for looking after the manor while we’re gone, even if it’s only for a little while! I’ll try to bring you back some souvenirs if I can. Oh, wait... I don’t have any money on me...”

“Oh, we don’t need anything like that, Madam! So long as you make it home safe and sound!”

“Yes, your safe return will be the best souvenir of all!”

“No matter how safe the territories are, they’re nothing like the capital, so please do take care of yourself!”

“That’s for sure! If worse comes to worst, use Master as a shield and then run for it!”

“Ha ha, you’re all just exaggerating! I’ll be just fine! Besides, Mr. Fisalis isn’t the only one who will be there with me. The guards are coming, too.” *Using Mr. Fisalis as a human shield sounds a little morally gray. ...But it might actually be a good plan.*

The servants and I chatted and goofed around in the foyer with our usual familiarity before Mr. Fisalis and his parents showed up. I was very reluctant to part with them, even just for a short time.

“Sorry to keep you. Let’s get going,” Mr. Fisalis called as he gallantly descended the stairs towards me.

When we stepped out the door, there were two carriages parked under the carriage porch. The one in the back was slightly smaller than the one in front, and had been loaded with all the luggage.

So I guess we’re supposed to get in the one in the front, the one Rohtas is holding open the door to. If I’m not mistaken, it looks a little different than the super comfy one we usually take when we go out, though.

Wondering what the difference could be, I tilted my head in confusion as I

looked closely at the carriage.

“You’ll be riding in a carriage specially made for long distances today. I believe you’ll find it even *more* comfortable than the usual one,” Rohtas told us.

You’re telling me we have separate carriages for short-and long-distance rides!? What? You classify them based on distance!? Rich people really are something else! My family only had a single one, and you felt every bump and pothole along the way!

Yet again, I was gobsmacked by something I could not understand. The carriage was similar to our usual ride—a rich dark red color, with the Fisalis family crest on the doors.

Is it just me, or is it a little larger than our usual carriage, too? I wondered as Mr. Fisalis escorted me over and helped me in. Once we both took our seats, I was able to take a good look at the interior.

“Wooooow, it’s so plush!” I marveled. The seats were many times softer than the ones in the regular carriage. It couldn’t imagine getting travel fatigue while sitting on these cushions, even on the longest of rides.

And to top it all off, there’s even some pillows in here, too! This is perfect! It’ll be like I’m traveling on my sofa. Tragically, Mr. Fisalis is watching, so I can’t dive head first into the pillows like I do on my bed. But it looks like the windows are bigger in this one, too, so I’ll be able to take in the scenery going by! I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I’m super excited all of a sudden!

At some point as I was spazzing out in the carriage, Lord and Lady Fisalis appeared on the other side of the window.

“Father Fisalis! Mother Fisalis!”

“Have fun on your trip. Er, no, that’s not right. Madam, I do hope you’ll enjoy yourself on your trip. I shall look after the manor while you are away,” said Lord Fisalis, dressed in a black tailcoat and all in all the spitting image of Rohtas, just like he said.

Oh, and he’s wearing glasses, too! Is that going too far, maybe?

Taking a quick glance at Rohtas, I saw him looking at my father-in-law with an

unimpressed half-smile.

“Hee hee! I will! Thank you!”

“Father, make sure nothing happens to the house.”

“You got it!” Mr. Fisalis and I each replied, to which Lord Fisalis responded with a thumbs-up and a wide grin.

Hmm, I don't think that's something Rohtas would do...

“Have a wonderful time, Viii!”

“Take care, you two!”

“Take care on your trip, Master and Madam!” my in-laws and the servants called to us as the carriage pulled away.

Once my excitement had subsided and I was in my right mind again, I realized that Mr. Fisalis had been watching me with a look that could only be described as secondhand embarrassment.

...Oh no. I just want to crawl under these cushions and die. He's been quietly watching me this whole time!

I tidied my skirt and sat up straighter in an attempt to hide my embarrassment.

I normally spend my day around other people, so I never really run out of things to talk about... but here in the carriage, it's just Mr. Fisalis and I. Rohtas, Stellaria, and Rosa are riding with the luggage in the carriage behind us. I'm trapped in this tiny space with him until we get to the duchy. I hope we'll find something to talk about. It'll be really rough if we don't...

Our escorts were the guards from the manor, riding on horses ahead of and behind the carriages. Of course, the coachmen were guards, too.

This is obviously no commoner out on some little day trip. Everyone must be able to tell this is the duke on an important excursion.

And so we went along, swaying over the neatly paved roads of the capital, in what was probably the fanciest, most comfortable carriage I would ever set foot in.

My family's own territory was to the north of the capital; due to its location, it was not only bitterly cold, but also barren, which made for low revenue. That was the reason we were so poor. The Fisalis family's territory, on the other hand, was located south of the capital. There, the climate was much milder and fertile soil bore abundant crops.

It also has ample mineral resources... not to mention it's even got tourist attractions. How lucky can you get? But I suppose those are only really resources if you make good use of them. And they must be doing just that, because the Fisalis family has been so prosperous. I really ought to study what they're doing out there in the Fisalis territories!

The carriage clattered and swayed along past landscapes I'd never seen before. Mr. Fisalis started to speak to me as I stared, captivated, out the window at all the new scenery.

"We're going to the manor in the largest of our territories first. We'll spend the night there."

"Is that where your parents have been living?"

"Yes. They have servants there too, though, so it's not like we'll be roughing it. Since I figure we'll be tired from traveling all day today, I'll show you around the territory tomorrow."

"Okay. So, how long will it be until we get there?"

"Hmm, we're going a tad slower today, so if we keep this pace, probably half a day. The carriage would rock violently if we went faster, and that can be really unpleasant."

Half a day at a slow pace, huh? That's the exact opposite of how we traveled back and forth from the capital to my family's territory. I've seen where the duchy is on a map, but I couldn't actually estimate how long it would take to go there.

"I suppose we might as well take our time, since we're on vacation. Maybe we should stop at a town or someplace on the way. My time off has only just begun, and we'll be just fine as long as we get to our destination by nightfall," Mr. Fisalis said with a smile, apparently quite pleased that he'd soon be

relaxing.

That's right. Our vacation has only just begun! But I'm packed in here, almost as snugly as the things in my trunk, with Mr. Fisalis. Will I even make it to the territory?

All my excitement for the trip was suddenly, completely forgotten.

16 — Arriving at the Territory

The swaying of the carriage and clatter of its wheels were gentle and quiet as we glided through the capital, since the roads there were all well-paved. Additionally, since the carriage offered an exceptionally smooth ride to begin with, I thought that I would be struggling to stay awake—perhaps even while nervously trying to have a normal conversation with Mr. Fisalis—but to my surprise, I never lost interest in watching the scenery passing by the other side of the window, as all of it was new to me.

“Wow! What lush, green fields!” I exclaimed.

“This area produces a lot of grain, so those are probably the first sprouts. They sure do look healthy and green! This year’s going to be another bumper crop for sure.”

“Hopefully no storms will pass through before then.”

“Even the streets and houses look different than the ones in Rozhe. Their coziness is really charming.”

“Just the kind of rustic look you’d expect from a productive farming town, right?”

“Why don’t we take a break here and have some lunch? We’re in Rovence, so their vegetable dishes are bound to be good.”

“Oooh! Rovençal food! I used to have that stuff as a regional-cuisine staff meal...”

“What!?”

“Oh, nothing~☆”

At first, I was worried whether we’d find anything to talk about over the course of the long ride, but time passed very tranquilly as Mr. Fisalis and I talked about the fresh new sights I was viewing through the window. I was happy that my worries were unfounded.

As we took a break for some lunch in town (er, maybe village is a better word?) just as Mr. Fisalis had suggested, we had a relaxing time taking in the sights and sounds of the road that led to the duchy.

Most of the roads outside of the capital are of poor quality, but this one is still paved and in good shape. Curious. Speaking from what little experience I have, whenever my family would go to our territory, the carriage would rock violently and rattle over the roads as soon as we were outside the capital. That doesn't seem to be the case here at all, though.

"Rozhe is behind us now, right?" I asked Mr. Fisalis.

"Yep, we're no longer in Rozhe. We're in the territories, but only just inside the border."

Right, because the duchy shares a border with the capital. Even if it's adjacent, though, we're still a little ways away from the bigger towns.

"I couldn't help but notice that the roads are paved, even out here in the middle of nowhere," I said, voicing my puzzlement.

"Right you are. All the roads in this territory are paved, just like in Rozhe. And not just the roads around the territory, either—even the ones that lead out away from major cities are paved like this. Of course, no matter what road you take, they all lead to Rozhe and the duchy."

Are you telling me that all of the roads connect to the capital? And to the duchy, too!? He really let that roll off his tongue like it was no big deal. I had no idea. I want the roads in my family's territory to be paved, too, then. Wait, what? My family's territory doesn't qualify as a major city? My bad!

On the topic of my family's territory, since we had to take pretty beat-up roads to go there, the carriage would always rock so violently I was afraid I'd smack my head! Granted, the money for paving the roads simply wasn't there. I'm sorry, citizens!

The Fisalis family clearly has the means to see that roads in their duchy are properly paved, though. Good for them.

As we trundled down the road, we seemed to pass by a little bit of everything: rustic vistas, sprawling fields, woodlands, and mining areas that looked like

wastelands at first glance.

I can tell this place is flourishing just by the lush fields of grain. We grew some grain in my family's fields, but I guess due to the limited daylight hours and the cold climate, they never got anywhere near as lush as the fields here. They were just... brown. You have bested me again, duchy!

The entire mining region was covered in reddish brown soil—the only thing left after everything on the top had been torn up to dig out the ore. I couldn't help but stare at the strangely-colored landscape.

"This is where the duchy's famous rubies are collected," Mr. Fisalis explained as we passed through.

He must mean those pigeon blood rubies.

"Maybe all the rubies are what makes the ground so red?" I remarked casually.

"I don't think it works that way," replied a deadpan Mr. Fisalis.

Whoops, looks like Mr. Fisalis got stuck playing my straight man.

After we had traveled for some time, we arrived at a place with noticeably more people walking around. It seemed like a town, what with the houses and wider streets. It wasn't as big as the capital, but it still appeared to be a fairly large city.

I turned from where my face was pressed against the window to Mr. Fisalis. "Where are we?"

"This is the center of the territory, Pied de la Montjuc. The family villa is located on the edge of the town on Montjuc Hill. See, look, over there," he explained, leaning toward the window and pointing. In that direction, I could just barely spot a small manor on a low hill overlooking the town. We were still far away, though, so I couldn't make out much detail.



The number of pedestrians increased and more houses and shops came into view the deeper we drove into the town, on our way to the villa. It was one little stone house after another, with nothing that looked like any of the nobles' manors back in the capital to be seen. The people on the street were all wearing neat, rustic clothes.

If anything, it looks like the streets where the commoners live in the capital. All the houses here are made of pale reddish-brown stone, so the whole town has a very cohesive aesthetic. It's such a beautiful color, too.

"What a pretty-looking town!" I blurted out.

"The buildings here use the stone extracted from the mines, so that's why it has such a uniform palette. Almost everything in town is a shade of pink, as you can see. Do you like it?"

"Yes, very much!" *In the capital and my family's territory, the buildings are all made of white and gray stone, so it's exciting to see these streets lined with these lovely, perfectly matching buildings.*

Not to mention...

It's so wonderful that they use the rock from the mines! They're recycling, using every last bit of material they have. My frugality senses are tingling! This duchy rocks! And now that I'm thinking about it, the area around the mines was reddish, too, wasn't it? And that's all due to the color of those rubies, I'm sure of it!

...Though Mr. Fisalis quashed that idea in record time.

While I was watching the scenery slowly passing us by, a shop with a red awning caught my attention. Upon closer inspection, it appeared to be a patio cafe with several white sets of tables and chairs arranged out front and townspeople lounging here and there.

"Wow, that shop looks so lovely..." I murmured, but before I knew it, we had already passed it by.

There was a pretty girl peddling flowers on the corner, and an artist painting pictures to sell. And there was a marketplace with vendors selling all sorts of

fruits and vegetables, piled high in baskets. My excitement only grew as I peered out onto the lively streets.

Yeah, I definitely want Mr. Fisalis to take me around town! I'll ask him later, if he doesn't mind.

As I stared out at the streets through the carriage window, fully absorbed in the scene before me, I saw some of the people walking down the street turn to the carriage and nod, as if in greeting.

Why are they doing that? ...Oh, I get it. The Fisalis family crest is on the doors, so it's obvious their lord is inside! I really can't afford to embarrass us.

I sat up a little straighter.

Continuing down the main street, we passed through what looked like residential areas and shopping districts until we finally reached the foot of Montjuc Hill. The carriage slowly began to ascend the hillside. The streets that I had been gazing at only moments earlier quickly grew farther and farther away below us. The view of the town from above was nothing like looking at it from the ground, but just as impressive.

With the little town farther and farther behind us, we drew ever closer to the villa. I hadn't been able to tell from a distance, but now that I was closer I could see that the villa looked to be made of the same pink stone as the buildings back in town.

It's a splendid estate, but it's not as big as the manor in the capital. It looks like it could fit maybe three of the annexes in it. A modest, yet refined building, if I do say so myself.

A plethora of multi-colored flowers and well-pruned trees surrounded the villa. Overall, the place was unassuming, but still thoughtfully and scrupulously looked after.

"It's so lovely!" I let out a sigh of wonder as the carriage passed through the gate and I finally got a look at the villa. Mr. Fisalis was staring, too.

It must have been a long time since he was last here.

"It used to be in pretty bad shape, but it was rebuilt back when my parents

kept themselves shut away here. This is my mother's favorite place."

"It does seem like that sort of place. But still, it's truly enchanting!"

"I'm sure she'd be happy to hear that. At any rate, we've arrived."

The carriage quietly came to a stop and the coachman opened the doors.

The servants who worked at the villa had come just outside the door to greet us, although there were not as many of them as at the manor in the capital. There were five of them in total. *They look a tad older overall, too.*

At that moment, an older man—maybe in his early sixties—with elegantly styled white hair approached us and bowed politely.

"Welcome, Young Master, Young Madam."

Goodness, what a gentle smile this handsome fellow has!

The creases in the corners of his eyes gave him such a kind, grandfatherly look that my initial impulse was to yell "Grandpa!" and give him a hug. But let's not focus on that too much.

I'm not used to being called "young madam" though, so now I'm a little flustered! But I guess here, my father-in-law is "Master" and my mother-in-law is "Madam," so we have to avoid confusion.

As I stood there bashfully contemplating my new title, Mr. Fisalis turned to the old man and started chatting with him.

"It's been a while, Fennel. Seems you'll be looking after me again, I suppose. Thank you." Then Mr. Fisalis introduced the two of us. "Viola, this is the butler, Fennel. He worked at the manor prior to Rohtas."

Oh ho, so this is Rohtas' predecessor!

When I glanced over at Rohtas, he gave a small nod.

"It's nice to meet you. I'm Viola. Thank you for looking after us while we're here," I said with a bow.

Oh, crud. I bowed to him, even though I'm the lady of the house. Is he going to scold me for doing something so un-madam-like?

Fennel, however, did not seem to mind.

“You’re too kind. You need not be so formal, Madam; this is where the dukes of the Fisalis family come to retire and while away the hours,” he said with a cheerful smile.

That’s a relief.

“What are we standing around and talking for? Viola, you must be tired after riding in the carriage for so long. Let’s get you inside,” Mr. Fisalis said, escorting me to the door.

“Right this way,” Fennel said, holding the door open and motioning for us to enter.

If anyone here was a shut-in, it was me, so I became excited all over again at the chance to see what new and rare sights awaited inside.

It’s okay to get like this every once in a while. I’ve come all the way here, so I might as well enjoy myself, right? And if I have to be with Mr. Fisalis to do that, then he can be the one to show me around! It’ll be like going on a tour—which is to say, a lot of fun.

After all, the ride over here was unexpectedly fun and totally not the torture I expected. Yes, more positive thinking!

17 — A Walk, Not a Date!

Pied de la Montjuc, the town that served as the hub of the main Fisalis duchy, was commonly referred to as just Le Pied. We had passed through the town on our way to the villa, and the wonderful sights I had seen on those streets very much appealed to my feminine sensibilities.

Just after we arrived at the villa, I said “Mr. Fisalis! I’d like to go see the town later.”

It had taken us half a day to get to the duchy from the capital. Since we’d arrived at the villa before evening, even though we’d taken our time getting there, I was hoping we could have a look around the town.

“You mean today? Right now?” Mr. Fisalis was surprised. Clearly, he hadn’t been expecting such a short-notice request from me.

“Yeah. It doesn’t *have* to be now, if that won’t work. I was just thinking that we still had some time today.”

“We only just got here; surely you must be tired? We had to put up with the rocking in the carriage for quite a long time. How about tomorrow? I don’t have anything in particular planned for then, so that would be a perfect time.”

“You mean it!? That sounds good to me. Could we make it a walk and go on foot?”

Since I specifically want to explore, I don’t want to ride in a carriage. We could walk along, peeking down narrow alleys and popping into any shops that catch our eye—it’s that carefree wandering that makes going on walks fun! Going straight to every single corner flower shop and cafe by carriage would be a really dull excursion.

“Going for a walk...? You mean like, a date?”

“It’s a walk; that’s all.”

“...What do you think of the young madam’s proposal, Fennel?” Mr. Fisalis

asked, glancing over at Rohtas and Fennel as he thought it over.

“...The town has been experiencing a slight increase in reports of public disorder lately, so I would advise against it,” Fennel replied, after some hesitation.

But when we drove through town today, everything looked so peaceful! What could possibly be going on?

Mr. Fisalis’ eyebrows rose in surprise at Fennel’s reply.

“Has it gotten that bad?”

“No, it’s not a lost cause quite yet, but it’s certainly gotten worse.”

“I see... If that’s the case, I ought to go see the state of things for myself. I’ll inspect the place as we stroll. We should be able to handle that much, right?”

Fennel nodded in response. “...I suppose so.”

He must be talking about taking guards and whatnot. Mr. Fisalis may be an active-duty knight, but he’s still a VIP, so we can’t afford to let him get hurt! Not to mention this town isn’t like the capital.

What’s that? No, the capital is very safe! Back when I lived with my parents, I’d go shopping by myself all the time. And Mr. Fisalis and I never took guards with us when we went out together.

Fennel’s talking it over now with Mr. Fisalis and Rohtas; it looks like he’s on board, too.

“So, you want to walk there?” Mr. Fisalis approved of my suggestion with a bright smile.

“Yes! Thank you!” *Yay!*

Once the men arrived at an agreement, Fennel showed us to our room.

You heard that right. *Our* room.

“Madam prepared this room, figuring it would be used eventually,” Fennel said, leading us to what they had apparently been calling the “Honeymoon Suite.”

Yup, it’s specifically for the two of us. Personally, I had optimistically assumed

we'd be staying in two separate rooms.

For a split second, I considered asking for separate rooms anyway, just like our arrangement at the manor, but I decided not to. After all, that was the manor, so it made sense to do that there. I couldn't just impose my will on the servants here when they didn't know our little *situation*!

So I pretended there was no problem and said, "What a lovely room! I'll have to thank Mother Fisalis next time I see her!" *I deserve an acting award.*

Fortunately, the bedroom and sitting room were separate, so we decided that Mr. Fisalis would get changed in the sitting room and I would use the bedroom.

What, no—*of course* I wasn't going to let there be any gray areas! We got into our usual argument over who'd sleep where, so we settled on sharing the bed, but with a clear boundary line in place. Naturally, I regretted not bringing Mr. Fish, but there was no use crying over it. Our line of demarcation for our time there consisted of a pillow and a sofa cushion. Fortunately, there was still plenty of room on each side for both of us.

The next day:

I returned to our room after breakfast to get ready for our outing. I went into the bedroom and selected the most unassuming outfit that Stellaria had packed for me.

"How about this?" It was a simple smock dress made of off-white fabric, accented with a cute white lace collar. It wasn't a complicated design, but the silhouette was quite refined. *All of Madame's designs are very flattering.*

"Oh yes, that looks good. You can wear these shoes with it—I think flats would work best. I'll pull your hair back into something loose, like the girls in town wear. We can tie it back with a large bow," Stellaria said as she efficiently helped me get ready for my walk around town. We did my usual "no makeup" look, but with a small town twist.

Getting ready was extremely easy, since we didn't have to put much thought into it. Mr. Fisalis was reclining on the sofa when I exited the bedroom, reading over some document or other and ready to go. He was wearing the casual outfit

that his maids (not me) had picked out for him. And, yes, his shirt was left untucked.

His is a very uncomplicated outfit, too, but that doesn't mean it isn't super classy anyway. No matter what he wears, nothing can conceal the inborn elegance that basically seeps from his pores.

Jeez, I really do look like a "townie" compared to him. Then again, maybe even "townie" is a stretch, considering my whole presence just screams "commoner." Ugh, even just the thought makes me depressed.

Whatever, this'll do for now. I'll just ignore it.

Mr. Fisalis set the papers down on the table when he saw me and said, "You look lovely today! I'm looking forward to our date." The supernova-like radiance of his smile left me reeling.

Once again, I've been blown over. And of course he's calling this a date.

"Sorry to keep you waiting! I'm ready, so let's get going," I urged him, pretending I hadn't heard all that stuff about a *date*.

And so, the servants bade us farewell and we left the villa. There were no bodyguards to be seen anywhere, however.

"Mr. Fisalis? What happened to the bodyguards?" I asked as I looked this way and that.

"Oh, it's nothing you need to worry about. Let's go," he said, holding out his hand.

Huh? Why is he doing this?

I stared at it, confused as to what he wanted me to do. At this, Mr. Fisalis smiled wryly before taking my hand in his.

"Uhwah!?" Wasn't expecting that!

Seeing what must have been the very stupid expression I was wearing, Mr. Fisalis chuckled. "We're finally on a date. Sometimes people do this on dates."

No, I-I don't want to do this, not even "sometimes"!

"...This is way too embarrassing."

“Trust me, everyone does this when they’re in town.”

When I tried raising my hand, he didn’t loosen his grip on it, let alone let me go—he just let his hand be raised, still wrapped around mine. He was grinning ear to ear when I looked up from our clasped hands back at him.

“By ‘everyone,’ you mean that you’ve... seen people doing this?”

“Have I? Hmmm, I wonder. Oh well, time’s a-wasting, as they say. Let’s go!”

You were just pretending that you saw people doing this! You most certainly did not see everyone holding hands!

Ugh, and now the servants are giving us that look that screams, “I’m embarrassed just watching this!” Don’t look at me with those fake smiles... This must be what they had in mind when they made that saying, “He who runs away lives to fight another day!” I’ve got to split, and fast!

I looked over my shoulder and called to the servants, “We’ll see you later!”

“Have a wonderful time!” they cheerfully called back.

I waved at them as I pulled Mr. Fisalis down the road toward town.

The servants all standing by the door went out of view once we had gone a little way down the gently sloping hill.

“So we’re going to walk like this today?” I asked Mr. Fisalis as I stared at our entwined hands.

“Of course we are. Oh, that reminds me. Since we don’t know who we may run into here, make sure you don’t get separated from me.”

“Really? But this is so embarrassing.”

“It is? Huh, I’m not embarrassed at all,” he quipped back.

Why, you... Did you leave your sense of shame back in the capital?

18 — The Slightly Dangerous Town of Le Pied

I descended Montjuc Hill hand in hand with Mr. Fisalis, feeling a strange mix of excitement and embarrassment (no, strike that—it was all embarrassment!). What with the nice weather, though, it felt just like a leisurely stroll. That’s right—a nice, platonic outing!

We walked along, admiring the scenery as we went, and before long we had arrived in Le Pied. The main street was bustling with foot traffic and carriages.

I can get a better sense of the energy and activity in this town right now than I could when I passed through in the carriage yesterday. There are wagons piled high with crops going up and down the streets, people carrying heavy-looking shopping baskets—perhaps on their way home from the market—finely dressed men and women, and frolicking children.

“It’s so crowded.”

For someone like me, who’s never been anywhere besides the capital and my family’s own territory, everywhere I look there’s something or someone interesting and completely new. Our territory never had this kind of energy. This must be what real affluence looks like, I thought dejectedly.

“Yeah, it is. Le Pied is the main city in the duchy, so most of the crops and mineral resources from this area that aren’t sent straight to Rozhe are collected here first. Oh, and try not to gawk so much. It’s dangerous.” That being said, Mr. Fisalis squeezed my hand as if to say it was okay if I kept gawking around like that, and he synchronized his steps with mine. It was embarrassing for sure, holding hands with him, but it did actually make me feel a little more secure.

“By crops, do you mean, like, those fruits from the southern territory you sent me?”

“Yeah, of course,” he nodded.

The fruit he sent me while he was deployed. Oh, yeah—I didn’t understand the message he sent with it. And then neither Rohtas nor Father Fisalis ever

explained it to me. ...What's that you say? I should find out for myself?

No sooner had I thought that than an uneasy feeling washed over me.

Could I ask Mr. Fisalis about it now? I wondered.

"Mr. Fisalis? About that fruit—it was some sort of message, right?" I asked him, trying to sound casual in order to satiate my own curiosity. *Yup, totally nailed it*☆

"Hm? Oh, yes, I suppose it was. But I'm kind of glad you didn't understand it."

Ah ha! And now he's trying to give me the slip!

Sure, he smiled back at me, with his trademark grin, but the way he replied—like it wasn't worth talking about—makes me feel like it is, in fact, very much worth talking about!

"But Father and Mother Fisalis, and even Rohtas... *everyone* who was there knew what it meant, so it made me feel a little left out." *Heck, I did get a little sulky over it.*

"Oh, I see. I didn't mean to make you feel that way; I apologize. Well, it's not too complicated. It's basically means 'the rat's in the bag.'"

"Ah, okay. Father Fisalis mentioned something like that, I think."

"Right. The fruit inside the sack represented the enemy; the sack itself was our army, so the sack full of fruit meant that we had the enemy surrounded with no chance of escape. I wanted to let you know that the war was nearly over, but an obvious letter might not have passed inspection. Plus, by sending the message that way—as a sack of fruit—even if Aurantia happened to get a hold of it, they probably wouldn't realize it was anything more than a simple bag of fruit. That's why I decided to send the message that way," Mr. Fisalis explained breezily.

"Oh... so there was a deeper meaning..." *Well, that explains it. Color me dumbfounded. He can probably tell by my face that I had no clue what it meant.*

Mr. Fisalis laughed and added, "It's a historical tradition, but not one that's widely known. I'm not surprised you didn't know." He didn't put me down for not knowing, but now my poor study habits had been exposed.

I'm really just not cut out for formal study, though...

"Um, I-I'll be sure to read up on those stories for next time!" There, that should smooth things over for now.

"I think there's a book on that topic in the manor library back in Rozhe, if you'd like to read it. Rohtas can get it for you if you let him know— You know what, I'll get it out myself once we get back."

"You don't need to do that for me! I'll just ask Rohtas when we get home."

"But I really don't mind."

"Don't be absurd! I'll find it myself."

As we were walking and arguing over how I would come into possession of that history book, we came to a plaza with a number of eateries and shops. The whole place was alive with townspeople doing their shopping and merchants doing their selling. And by that, I meant we'd arrived at...

"A market!"

"Yup. Want to go have a look?"

"Yes!" Just standing out here and window-shopping is fun, too, though! I didn't have that luxury before I got married. I only ever went to the greengrocer with a purpose! Ooh, there's a fruit seller, and a vegetable seller...

I feel like I'll see a lot of items here that we can't get back in the capital. This place is so different.

No sooner had we set foot in the plaza than we were confronted with a noisy crowd.

"What's that about?"

"Who knows?"

Looking around, I saw some people simply passing by with looks of disinterest, while others were approaching with rapt attention. Still others were standing around the crowd in a loose circle, watching from a safe distance. It definitely didn't seem like they were enjoying a street show or anything like that.

What could this possibly be?

“That hurt, you bastard!”

“You’re the one who swung first!” I heard two angry voices say before the sounds of fighting erupted from the crowd!

What is this!? Are they having a fistfight!?

“M-Mr. Fisalis!”

“Don’t worry, it’ll be fine. The guards ought to be here any second.”

There’s no way they’ll spot us in this crowd, so let’s get a little closer to the fight... was the absolute *last* thing on my mind.

I’m actually kind of scared!

Noticing that I was nervous, Mr. Fisalis put his arm around my shoulder comfortingly and pulled me closer.

“Someone stop them! They’re making a huge scene!”

“No, call the guards!”

“There’s no point—the guards won’t show up just for a fight! They’re busy with other stuff!”

The spectators noisily aired their respective takes on the matter.

Mr. Fisalis’ expression turned grim for a moment. We were watching the fight unfold from not too far away. “...What are the guards *doing*?” he muttered, his tone somewhat irate.

“I’m sure they’re hurrying on over as we speak!”

“Their post isn’t that far from here. In fact, I would expect them to have arrived right after this fight broke out...” he said, before murmuring, “Is this what Fennel was talking about?”

“Don’t tell me you’re going to try to stop them, Mr. Fisalis!?”

“No, but I will watch and see how it plays out. That said, if I deem them enough of a nuisance to the folks around them, I will be obligated to do something.”

A wait-and-see approach, eh? Is this part of the whole “inspection” thing?

Meanwhile, the fight continued. While I looked on, anxiously wondering what would happen, the assembled onlookers began yelling things like, “Enough already!” and “Troublemakers!” as they stepped in to stop them.

I peered nervously through an opening in the crowd, only to discover the pair at the center of the fracas had been restrained by the five or six men who’d jumped into the fray. They both had their arms pinned behind their backs.

“All right, boys, start walking.”

“Behave yourself, and you might just get off with a talking-to at the guard post.”

“Cripes, you just *had* to go and raise a commotion.”

And so they were dragged elsewhere, subjected to quite the earful all the while. The guards never did show up.

“...I’m happy the fight died down.”

“I’m glad the townsfolk intervened, but I’m not thrilled about the guards’ failure to arrive. I’ll need to inquire about that later.”

While I stood there, a woman relieved, Mr. Fisalis stood stony-faced beside me. I could almost swear he’d said that last bit to spur himself on. It seemed he felt the guards’ absence was a serious problem. And though I didn’t know what it had been like in the past, I did kind of want the guards to *actively* keep the peace, even when it came to petty little street brawls.

The ruckus having abated, the people who had gathered around went their separate ways in small groups. We decided to resume our market exploration. It was exactly what I’d imagined it would be from my quick glance around the place—while there were fruits and vegetables that could be found at the capital, there were also a fair few varieties I’d never laid eyes on.

“Wow, look here! This is the same fruit you sent me, isn’t it, Mr. Fisalis?” I’d come across the familiar-looking fruit in the shopfront of the fruit store that was being tended to by a plump, kindly old woman. It was a rich, ripe red, and shaped like a star. Even *I’d* remember such aesthetically pleasing produce. The

fact that it was so sweet and delicious didn't hurt either!

"Precisely so. They're also from down south, and they're named 'stella fruitia.' As they're delicate and easy to damage, they don't usually make it all the way to Rozhe. Were the ones I sent you to your taste?"

"I loved them! They looked so cute, and were delicious to boot. I could never forget them."

"Then I'll request they be served as dessert during suppertime."

"That would be amazing!"

That was the sort of banal chatter we engaged in as we toured the various shops. As La Pied was relatively close to the sea, there were plenty of places stocking fresh fish, not to mention the meat vendors. I enjoyed myself quite a bit looking around at the assortment of foodstuffs on display, which so differed from what I was used to at the capital. The vividness of the newly-picked vegetables and fruits was only matched by the vigor of the still-jumping fish. And they all looked so fresh and tasty! I could only imagine what manner of sumptuous cuisine could be cooked up using ingredients like these.

I ought to have brought Cartham along! Come to think of it, the chefs at the villa must also be deft hands at cooking. Now I'm all psyched for the dinners to come!

"Mr. Fisalis, everything here sure looks so fresh and flavorful," I remarked.

And then, it happened. Voices from up ahead:

"Thief!!" shrieked a woman.

"Who? Where!?"

"Where'd the cad run off to!?"

"Over there!"

No way, another disturbance!? The last one just ended! I mean, the town looked fairly peaceful at first, but I guess La Pied might actually be fraught with danger. So that's why Fennel looked so worried when I said I wanted to take a stroll.

Mr. Fisalis swept me up into a protective embrace. Naturally, news of the thief had me ill at ease, so I clung to him. That was when a young man came running frantically toward us. Several other men were behind him, giving chase. The young man could only be the thief in question.

...But this was hardly the time to analyze the situation at a leisurely pace!

“Mr. Fisalis! He’s coming our way!”

“There’s no need to worry.”

The fleeing robber kept bumping into passersby as he approached. I couldn’t help but be intimidated by his bloodshot eyes and menacing scowl! “Ahh...!”

I could hear his labored breathing grow louder and louder, and see the cloud of dust his feet kicked up. The men in hot pursuit were shouting angrily.

Oh my god! He’s running straight for us! I clung yet tighter to Mr. Fisalis.

That very instant, Mr. Fisalis suddenly pulled away (with me in tow, obviously). As I’d been clinging to him, I was now behind him. He wasted no time sticking out one of his long legs, which worked its magic as the man tripped and tumbled over the outstretched limb!

“Huh!? ...Ah!! Oww!”

Given how fast the man had been running, it was no surprise that he couldn’t dodge Mr. Fisalis’s leg, earning himself quite the dramatic faceplant. The fruits he’d purloined also rolled out onto the ground. ...*Wait, those are stella fruitias! The fruits we were talking about just a moment ago!*

The thief must have taken quite a beating, falling on his face with that much momentum, because he wasn’t getting up. That gave his pursuers more than enough time to reach him. Sadly for him, he was summarily arrested.

It all happened so fast, no one noticed Mr. Fisalis had tripped him. Of course, it was better that he *didn’t* stand out. He was a big shot, after all! And I wasn’t about to trumpet what happened far and wide, meritorious deed or not!

Yet again, I witnessed a man bound and dragged off.

How weird. Did nobody call the guards, maybe? “Are the guards on break today or something?”

“Perish the thought! That couldn’t be! Failing to arrive the first time is one thing, but a second time? What in blazes are they doing?” he said, clearly peeved.

“Then I’m sure their hands are just full.”

“It never used to be like this... Looks like I need to inquire the second we get home, then.”

That soon? The urgency level has officially gone up a notch.

“I must summon the Captain of the Guard as soon as we return...” I heard him mutter. His expression was not amused.

I looked down at the ground by my feet. There lay the fruits that had scattered about when the thief fell over. I stooped down to pick some up.

“Thank you, little miss,” said a voice.

I looked up. The old lady I had seen at the fruit store stood before my eyes, and she’d extended a hand my way.

“They’re not fit for purchase anymore, are they?” I wiped a fruit I’d picked up using a handkerchief. It was damaged on the outside, albeit only slightly. It was probably perfectly edible, but no one would be willing to part with their money for it. *They’re delicate fruits at the best of times! Why’d you have to go and do them so dirty!?*

The old lady was placing the fallen fruits into the basket she was holding as she spoke: “There’s no helping it; I’ll just have to eat these at home. Things have been so dicey around town ever since the war broke out. The guards have all been sent to the south,” she sighed.

Mr. Fisalis was listening, and his face grew ever grimmer. He was in quite the foul mood now. *The Captain of the Guard had better brace himself for his summons!*

The thief having been hauled away, the market bustled with activity once more, and we resumed our stroll.

19 — Kidnapped!?

It was near noon by the time we were done looking around the market. It seemed the market was quite large, as the shops stretched all the way down to the lanes and alleyways by the far side of the plaza. The assortment of wares on offer was plentiful and varied—it felt like they had everything under the sun for sale. But I had a more pressing concern: I was so engrossed in perusing the vendors that it slipped my mind, but I had actually been walking all day. We'd left the villa right after breakfast. And now it was already noon. Little wonder I was just a bit tired.

It's right around lunchtime. Nobody will mind if I ask to take a little break, right? I'd like to eat at that sidewalk cafe I saw yesterday. And I don't think it's that far from here either.

"Mr. Fisalis, we've been walking this whole time. You must be tired by now, surely? And it just so happens to be time for lunch. Why don't we grab some food while we rest for a bit? Unless they've already prepared lunch for us at the villa, in which case, shouldn't we start heading back?" I asked. He was walking alongside me. I gripped his hand harder in mine, as if to say, *"You listening?"*

"You're right—look at the time. I got so absorbed in seeing the market that I totally lost track! I told them we'd eat lunch in town somewhere. Shall we see if anything catches our eye nearby?" he said, squinting up at the sky. The bright old sun had climbed to its highest point.

Mr. Fisalis' reply delighted me. *I can hit up a nice place to eat in town! And this is just your everyday, run-of-the-mill town, too. I don't see any fancy restaurants anywhere. Commoner cuisine, here we come!* "Wow! Really? In that case, how about we go to that sidewalk cafe on the corner we walked past yesterday? I've been wanting to check it out," I suggested gleefully.

"Oh, that place... The one you were marveling at yesterday? It did look rather cute."

Mr. Fisalis! You remembered! And I'd only just been talking to myself, too.

“That’s the one!”

“Sounds good! Plus, it’s not far from here. Let’s go check it out.”

“Okay!!”

Mr. Fisalis had agreed so readily. *Awesome! This is the best!*

“Unless I’m mistaken... the cafe is that way. Let’s make our way over.”

“Yes, let’s!”

That was my husband for you—we’d merely been passing by when we’d spotted it yesterday, but it seemed he remembered exactly where it was. He had only to scan our surroundings to recall its location and start walking.

As we made for the cafe, we entered the market in front of the plaza and discovered a lovely little flower shop. It was opposite the place we’d come to earlier, so we hadn’t noticed it. At a glance, none of the flowers on display were the sorts I’d ever seen in the capital.

“Mr. Fisalis! May we go check out that flower shop?”

“Sure,” he said unhesitatingly.

Pleased, I pulled him by the hand and walked toward the flowers.

The plaza was teeming with folks out on the town, including people who were headed to the market and those who were on their way back from shopping. There was no traffic control; everyone was simply walking in whatever direction they wanted, when they wanted. We wove between the crowds so as not to bump into the people ambling toward the market, but just as we were about to exit out into the main street—

“Carriage coming through! Outta the way, or else you’ll get hurt!” Sure enough, I could hear the rattle of a wagon approach us.

I was going to move aside, but by that point it was already too late. Before I knew it, a whole mass of people (wagons and delivery people carrying goods to market, mostly) had swallowed us. To make matters worse, someone bumped into me and I ended up unclasping Mr. Fisalis’ hand.

“Ah! Mr. Fisalis!”

“Viola!”

A panicked Mr. Fisalis extended a hand, but there were people in the way! Nothing could prevent our separation as we got swept into the crowd.

“Out of the way! You’ll get hurt!”

Oh no, we’ll get separated at this rate!

Just then, another caravan passed through the gap; the distance between us only grew, until we were each pushed to opposite sides of the street. But I couldn’t just stand there; I was in the way of the people carrying their cargo. Moreover, it seemed quicker to cross the main road rather than to wait for the caravan to thin out.

“Mr. Fisalis! I’m going to head to the flower shop!”

“No, please, wait for me where you are! It’s too dangerous!”

“Okay— Ahh! I’m getting lost in the shuffle!”

I couldn’t stand in one place without getting whisked away by the succession of caravans.

“Viola!” Flustered, Mr. Fisalis struggled to reach me, visibly annoyed at the nonstop stream of wagons.

Meanwhile, we were only drifting farther and farther apart. Now that I was caught up in this caravan’s current, I realized I was headed back to the market. “I can’t stop without blocking their path, so I’ll see you there! Otherwise I’m going to get swept off to who knows where!” We were shouting at each other over the hustle and bustle.

I decided to pay the florist a visit by myself for now. That was right around when the congestion began to disperse, so I was able to cross the main street. As a result, I got to the flower shop a bit earlier than Mr. Fisalis.

At the shop, a girl who looked younger than me was selling flowers of both the cut and potted varieties.

I paused to catch my breath at the shopfront. “Phew! Made it!”

The girl smiled. “Hee hee, looks like you had a rough time, miss! You came

from the other side of the road, I take it? They're always delivering stuff to the market around this time. Just wagons and delivery folk clogging the paths from the plaza to inside the market."

"Ah, so that's what that was all about!" *I see, I see. Well, in any case, I'm relieved I escaped that commotion. Might as well peruse the flowers on display while I wait for Mr. Fisalis.*

Now that I could get a closer look, I knew for sure I'd never seen any of these flowers anywhere before. *I bet they're flowers you can only find around here.* Among them was a plant with heart-shaped flowers and leaves. I didn't know its name, but the contrast between the bright red flowers and the beguilingly deep green leaves was truly pretty.

The girl must have taken note of my appreciation for the plant, as she approached and said, "They're called andreanums, miss. They only grow in the Le Pied area."

"Oh, there you go! No wonder I've never seen these flowers before, then." I didn't think I'd seen any andreanums in the manor at the capitol, either. *Maybe they need the exact right climate and terrain.*

"Around here, andreanums are as normal as they come, but you don't see them many other places. May I ask where you're from, miss?"

"I'm from Rozhe."

"Rozhe, huh? It's a bit colder there, so I wouldn't expect to see many andreanums for sale."

"They don't do well in the cold?"

"I'm afraid not. I suppose Rozhe is borderline for them, temperature-wise. If given ample sunlight, I'm sure andreanums would do fine. Of course, a greenhouse would be best."

"That's good to know," I replied, peering at the flowers as she filled me in.

Then, I heard some rather boorish chatter from behind me:

"I haven't seen *you* around here."

"You're a cute one, cupcake."

“And those sure are some fancy clothes you got on, too. I bet you’re here with some well-to-do family, huh?”

“If you ask me, we just take her back with us and rake it in.”

Uh-oh, have I attracted some nasty customers? I mean, I definitely don’t want to get involved with people who’d literally say something like, “We just take her back with us and rake it in”!

The girl and I exchanged looks. *Better put some distance between me and them.*

I pretended to be too engrossed by the flowers to notice them while I attempted to flee to the back of the store.

“Don’t you ignore us.”

I felt a hand on each shoulder. *Huh? Me? “What is it?” I asked. Um, could you not put your mitts on my shoulders like we’re friends? I don’t even know what hole you crawled out of, and I have zero desire to have anything to do with creeps like you!*

I was about to look over my shoulder and give them a piece of my mind when suddenly, I was up in the air. *What the? What am I doing up here? Wait just one darn second! I’m not a bird!!*

Before I knew it, I was slammed unceremoniously against a hard surface.

Ow! Don’t handle me so rough! I’m not some piece of luggage for you to toss and carry around!!

“Mmrph!”

“Ha ha ha! You’re so light, missy! You’ll be no sweat at all to carry back.”

Before I knew it, I was staring at the back of a shabbily dressed man. *Am I seriously being carried over his shoulders right now!?*

I was more confused than I’d ever been. My body was jostled with each of my captor’s steps—I was being carried off to who knew where. And due to the pressure on my abdomen, I couldn’t even scream! *Mr. Fisalis, help me!!*

“Somebody, anybody—save her!” I heard the florist shout.

I needed to be shouting, too, but I was just in too much pain. *Oh no! At this rate, I'm gonna get abducted for real!!*

These people only saw me as some fair damsel (if I can call myself that) they might as well kidnap, but I was, after a fashion, a duchess. And one who belonged to a family of note! I was nobility before I got married, yes, but so destitute as to not be worth abducting. Now I was the lady of a prestigious ducal house. If I was kidnapped now, it'd be a *huge* hassle for everyone involved. I hated the idea of worrying the servants—but even more so, I was scared Mr. Fisalis might do something reckless. *He can single-handedly wipe out a whole company of enemy soldiers! Just because of a letter from me, too! If he found out I'd been abducted... I'm white as a sheet just imagining it! I can't just let you drag me off somewhere! I'm going to struggle like no one's business!*

I kicked my legs and thrashed as I punched desperately at his sturdy back. *Why'd I have to wear flats today!? I should've put on stilettos, or better yet, pointy-tipped shoes!!*

"If you keep struggling like that, I'm gonna end up dropping you, missy. And if I drop you, it's gonna hurt—so stay still!"

"Hey, don't go damaging the merchandise!"

The brawny ne'er-do-wells guffawed. Even my best efforts seemed to be completely futile against this brute. *This is the worst! I don't care if you drop me, and I don't care if it hurts! I'll thrash even harder!*

But all my struggling simply wasn't working, and the flower shop was getting farther and farther away. *How many buildings have we passed? I have no idea where we are now.* Moreover, the men were picking up their pace. Things were only getting worse; my strength was abating even as I struggled, courtesy of the shoulder blade digging into my poor stomach. *Urgh, it hurts so much I might faint. But no! I can't give in here! I've got to keep at it!*

I mustered all of my willpower, and summoned up all the strength I'd (maybe, possibly) built up helping out with the daily chores; my whole body was flailing, and for a moment the brute seemed about to drop me.

"Whoa there, missy!" he snapped, irritated that he'd been forced to stop in his tracks.

All right, now's my chance! Harder! Flail harder!

It was then I heard *his* voice: "Get your grubby hands off my wife."

His voice was much *colder* than usual. *Mr. Fisalis, you finally made it! Wait, that's not what I should be thinking right now.*

"Huh? Who called this lanky moron over here?"

"Wife? So she's married, huh?"

"Well, it don't matter to us if she's married or a sweet young virgin. Don't get in our way."

"You're in *my* way. Get out of my sight."

His voice was more chilling than I'd ever heard before! *He must be totally furious. He's going to decimate them!* I didn't need to be able to see him directly for his wrath to be palpable.

"Augh!" I shouted, as the man carrying me lost his balance. His tilting to the side made him lose his grip on my body. *Wait, does this mean I'm free!? I'm a bit bruised, but whatever. Gotta run now that he's dropped me!*

...or I was going to, but I was stopped by a man's embrace. An embrace that wasn't at all rough—instead, it was amazingly gentle and warm.

"Mr. Fisalis!!"

"I'm sorry you had to go through that," he said, his voice reverting to his usual kindly tone. "But you're safe now." He hugged me tight. "I'll tell you, it gave me quite a shock. I rushed over upon catching sight of a suspicious group of men, but I was held up by the crowd, so that's why it took me so long. Are you all right? They didn't do anything to you, did they?"

"I'm okay. Phew, am I ever relieved! I really thought they had me."

The tension drained out of my body, and I gave myself over to him. What a sense of security I felt, in his arms! It couldn't be clearer that we were both at ease now.

But that feeling only lasted so long. "Ow... that smarts, sonny boy," said the man who'd been struck down, rubbing his back as he stood up. I hadn't gotten a

good look at the man who'd been carrying me, but now I could see he was pretty muscular, with stained clothing donned in a sloppy, disheveled manner. The men beside him could only be his cohort. "You know how to throw a punch, for a scrawny beanpole."

"You've got some nice clothes on you, too, don't you? And I haven't seen either of your mugs around town. You a rich merchant's little prince or something?"

"I dunno how strong you are, but we've got you outnumbered. Bet we could sell the missus into prostitution, and you into slavery."

"Sounds like a plan!"

"Let's round 'em up!"

There were five of them in total, blocking our escape. They all wore dirty clothes and their skin, glistening with sweat, was tanned by the sun. If I had to guess, I'd say they were all maybe in their late twenties. One of them was small and chubby, but the other four were big and beefy. Apart from the man who'd been carrying me, every one of them had a rusty sword, or a heavy club, or some other intimidating weapon. Anybody would figure them for ruffians and outlaws. I couldn't help but think to myself, *Who are these sleazy bastards, and why are they straight out of an illustration of two-bit thugs!? They're seriously picking a fight with Mr. Fisalis. Talk about reckless. But in their heads, they've convinced themselves they're going to capture us and sell us off. I was told Le Pied had gotten a little dangerous, but this is way more than a "little"! ...Are we going to be okay? Mr. Fisalis is unarmed, and he's up against five men who are. Maybe this won't be so easy after all...*

I glanced at him, and found him lacking his usual smile. He was staring at the men with stern eyes. "Who are you people, anyway?" he queried, his voice just as cold as before.

He stood nonchalantly in front of me, so as to hide me from their gaze. *I want to watch, though, so I hope you don't mind if I peek my head out. Don't worry, I'll stay mostly hidden!*

"Who, us? Can't you see we're just common folk who want some coin?"

“If you come quiet, we’ll only have to hurt you a little bit!”

“Yeah, we wouldn’t want to have to get all rough in front of the lady.”

The hooligans were spouting off without a care in the world. They apparently failed to pick up on the icy aura pouring off Mr. Fisalis.

Holy moly, these guys are dumb. I guess it can’t be helped—they don’t know who Mr. Fisalis is. He’s a lord, and a knight! All he needs is a sword in his hand to annihilate a whole company of soldiers!

“...Hmph. I see you’re all hopeless scum,” he said, his voice even deeper.

By the way, I was peeking out from the side, watching this unfold. *Now they’ve gone and done it. They’ve made Mr. Fisalis truly incensed. I’ve never seen that expression on his face.*

With his usual gentle smile absent, his face looked so different. In its place was a baleful stare that would surely pierce the heart of any enemy. The air about him was absolutely frigid, like he was shrouded in biting cold. Was this what he was like when he got *serious*? He looked even more dependable than usual.

It was then I realized we were now surrounded by a crowd of people. *This is just like the street brawl from before, isn’t it!? It’s turned into a bit of a spectacle. How is this going to play out!?*

Mr. Fisalis was a valorous knight, sure, but he had no sword... no weapon at all. Meanwhile, he had five men to contend with, most of them armed. I did think he would *probably* be okay, but I couldn’t be a hundred percent sure. *No, I’m certain he’ll be all right!*

While I was biting my proverbial nails, unable to do anything besides watch, two young women stood right behind me. I’d never seen them before, so I assumed they were residents of the town. They were probably worried I might be caught up in a street brawl; I saw Mr. Fisalis signal to them with his eyes (“just stand by and watch”), to which both of the ladies nodded (“understood”).

Gently, Mr. Fisalis pushed me toward one of the women. I surmised he was saying “stand back”—a message I heard loud and clear!

The ladies led me even farther away from him. Then, two townsmen in the prime of their youth stepped in between me and Mr. Fisalis. *No way—did they get the drop on him?* But I saw how the two were glaring at the hoodlums just like Mr. Fisalis was, and realized they were allies. Upstanding citizens had intervened back during the fight at the market, and ordinary people had chased down that fleeing robber, too. Perhaps now that the guards couldn't attend to everything, a sort of community watch group had emerged.

While I was fretting over the folks around us, the tension between Mr. Fisalis and the thugs was reaching a boiling point.

"We don't take too kindly to being called scum, sonny."

"Looks to me like he wants a good thumping."

"Forgive us if we end up scarring that pretty face of yours. When she sees the sorry state we put you in, she'll dump you, no question."

"Haw haw, this'll be a riot!"

"Shall we, boys?"

"Let's do it!"

Their laughter was foolish and ugly. One of their number brandished his cudgel as he stepped toward Mr. Fisalis.

Uh-oh! Here we go! The fight's upon us!! Will Mr. Fisalis be all right!?

20 — Time to Show His Stuff!!

“You’re wide open,” murmured Mr. Fisalis. He was exuding an entirely different aura now. I was taken aback by the darkness in his smirk.

One of the hooligans swung in for the attack with his cudgel, but Mr. Fisalis swiftly ducked down to dodge it. Needless to say, the club sliced through nothing but thin air. The ruffian stumbled forward a pace or two and Mr. Fisalis, who was still crouching, used that momentum to slam his opponent in the ribs with one elbow. In no time flat, the man had sunk to the ground.

Well, that was quick. I mused that the word “sunk” described him in more ways than one.

“Is that all you’ve got? Was all that talk a bunch of hot air?” Mr. Fisalis dusted himself off and regarded the remaining four with an icy gaze.

The four men showed a fleeting moment of hesitation, flummoxed by the apparent strength of the prey they had deemed so weak, but they pulled themselves together before long.

“Is-Is that all we’ve got? That was just a lucky shot!!”

“Let’s see how you handle two of us at once! You better be ready!”

They must have been roused to action by their downed comrade, because they were red in the face as they circled in for the attack. *Two against one? Hmph! You cowards!!*

The able-bodied men among those behind Mr. Fisalis made to come forward, likely in an effort to provide backup, but he waved them away, even as his eyes remained locked on the enemy. “Don’t worry, I’ll be fine. Protect Viola for me.”

“Huh?”

It was like he had eyes in the back of his head. I was amazed.

“Quit posing, you little shit!” Evidently, the four thugs were not the type to shy away from spouting lines directly from the bad guy playbook. Iron rod and

rusted sword in hand, they leapt at Mr. Fisalis in unison.

Rusted or not, a sword was a sword. *Is he going to be okay!?*

But Mr. Fisalis nimbly dodged the blade and, getting around to his opponent's back in the same swift motion, struck the sword-wielder with a hand-chop to the back of the neck. The blow must have packed quite some power, because the man's head snapped forward violently. For the finishing blow, he then landed a brutal elbow to his side. The man's eyes rolled back in his head as he slumped to the ground. Ruffian number two's battleship was sunk.

While Mr. Fisalis was still crouching, another man brandishing an iron rod came in for a surprise attack from the rear!

"Mr. Fisalis! Behind you!" I shouted, covering my eyes.

But it seemed he was already well aware. Taking the rusted sword from the hand of the fallen, he spun on his heels and fended off the blow with a flash of steel. Though none too sharp, the blade sent the iron rod flying out of the enemy's hands.

Phew. I was scared stiff. I'm starting to think he really does have eyes in the back of his head!

"Dammit!" The disarmed man now raised a fist against him, but Mr. Fisalis coolly intercepted the incoming punch with one hand and slammed him down in a beautiful one-armed shoulder throw. With a great big thud and a sizable cloud of dust, ruffian number three had now made the floor's acquaintance. And it had all happened in the blink of an eye.

At some point during the scuffle, the fight had moved from the sidewalk to the main road. I scanned our surroundings, only to find a circle of people had formed around us—although the center of the circle was still just us.

Ruffian number three lay flat on the road, groggy from the impact. This melee was forcing wagons to stop in their tracks. *Ahh, my heart can't take this!*

"I told you—you're wide open," said Mr. Fisalis, eyes fixed on the last two as he smiled coldly. "Even freshly enlisted rookie soldiers could beat you."

He rested the pilfered blade on his shoulder. He was being so much *wilder*

than usual!



“Shut your mouth! We don’t need your confusing babble! What did you do!?”

“All I’m doing is clearing out some bad eggs. Have you got a problem with that?”

“You bastard!”

Mr. Fisalis had shown them just how strong he was, but they insisted on fighting an impossible fight. There were only two of them left, and it seemed as though they were planning to rush toward him on the count of three. Meanwhile, Mr. Fisalis brandished the blade he’d been resting on his shoulder. He showed no openings—not a single gap in his defense. He may have been a commanding officer, but he was still a knight, and he was naturally even more formidable when wielding a blade.

The brawny man was holding yet another sword that was in bad shape; the short, stocky man grasped a dagger. The big one sprang at him from the front, while fatso attacked from behind. *Oops, did I call him fat? Oh well.*

Mr. Fisalis crossed blade with blade, and he made short work of fatso with a swift kick, his long leg striking him right in the face!

“Auugh!!” That heavy blow knocked the man backwards so hard he flipped and rolled along the ground. Mr. Fisalis’ leg was longer than fatso’s arm, and the dagger had been flung away without harming him, only to be picked up by one of the good men behind Mr. Fisalis. *Nice job, guys.*

While fatso was writhing on the ground, Mr. Fisalis took care of the big one. He flicked away the enemy’s sword and then rammed his own sword’s pommel into the man’s solar plexus without missing a beat. The man was instantly knocked out by the painful blow, his body still bent forward at the waist even as he collapsed. But Mr. Fisalis came in with the finishing strike, bringing the sword’s hilt down on the back of his head. The man lay splayed out on the ground, defeated.

Out of the five men, only fatso remained conscious. At some point as he writhed in agony, he’d gotten closer to us and behind Mr. Fisalis. Fatso locked eyes with me, and put his hand to the wall to wobble back up to his feet before heading straight for me. That kick from earlier had smeared his face with blood

from his own injured nose—it was an image straight out of a horror show! *Stay away from me!*

“Ahhh!” I screamed.

“If it’s come to this, then I’ll just make off with *you!*”

Just then, a woman stepped in front of me, to protect me from fatso as he drew closer and closer. The men behind Mr. Fisalis also made to dash toward us. The woman’s face tensed as she watched fatso approach.

But Mr. Fisalis had cottoned on to what was happening behind his back. “Like I’d ever let you do that!” He spun right around and flung the sword he was holding. It flew under fatso’s nose and pierced the wall with a dull twang. This was more than enough to freeze fatso in his tracks.

Oh my god! That wall’s made of stone! But the sword stuck right through it!

Fatso’s knees buckled, and he fell onto his bottom. Mr. Fisalis quickly closed the distance between them and twisted the man’s arms behind him, pinning him. With a solid hand-chop to the neck, fatso finally gurgled and toppled over.

The fight was over in what seemed like an instant. *That was incredible! His motions are all so efficient—he’s a well-oiled fighting machine!!*

He dusted off his clothes, four brawny hoodlums and one fatso at his feet. Not one was so much as moaning—it was a total knockout. Mr. Fisalis’ expression was cool as could be, as though nothing had happened.

Wowzers! Mr. Fisalis really is a consummate knight!! This was the first time I’d seen him like this, and I couldn’t look away.

I wasn’t the only one enthralled by Mr. Fisalis’ gallant figure. Initially, the folks around us had simply watched with bated breath, but now they were all over us.

“That was insane, man!! I never would’ve guessed you’re this damn strong, behind that handsome face!!”

“You’re so thin! Where’s all that muscle hiding!?”

“I haven’t seen you around here, so thanks!!”

“Finally, those thugs get their just deserts!!”

“Thank you so much!!”

Applause and hoorays from the crowd came flying our way as everybody showered Mr. Fisalis with praise. *So those hoodlums were notorious the whole town over, I guess. Plus, I wasn't expecting anybody to be referring to Mr. Fisalis as just “man.” Not that that's what I should be dwelling on right now. I need to see if he's wounded! They came at him like bats out of hell—maybe they managed to land a blow I didn't catch?*

“That was amazing, Mr. Fisalis!” I shouted, after slipping out of the embrace of the woman who had been protecting me and dashing to his side. “You did away with them in no time! Are you wounded or hurt at all?”

When he looked at me, his menacing aura dissipated in an instant. He hugged me, relief written all over his face. His usual dazzling grin back in its usual place, he said, “No, I'm not wounded. I didn't even break a sweat, really, seeing as my training drills are much tougher. On the other hand, maybe I wouldn't have minded an injury or two, if it means you'd be treating my wounds, Viola,” he quipped, smiling.

Sheesh, I'm just relieved he's okay. “Not being wounded is *decidedly* better.”

“Okay, point taken. After all, if I got hurt in a light skirmish like that, I'd never live it down.”

“Not to mention it'd make Corydalis mad at you!”

Thanks to his embrace, the distance between us had narrowed. At point-blank range, his smile packed devastating destructive power, and to top it all off, he'd shown me just how capable a man he truly was. *If you ask me, a true man of skill's hard to beat. I can't stand people who are all talk!* And it was a true man of skill who was holding me in his arms... Ahh...

I suddenly felt all bashful. I fixed Mr. Fisalis' hair, which had gotten disheveled from the fight, and I gently patted away the rest of the dust that had settled on him.

“Alas, if only I'd had my trusty sword,” he said, staring at the blade that was still jutting out of the stone wall, “I would've taken care of them in a flash.”

Um, excuse me, but even that rusty old thing was a lethal edge in your hands! “I’m actually glad you *didn’t* have your sword on you,” I said, shaking my head.

Think how dicey that would’ve been. Your trusty sword’s so shiny and sharp... Plus, they were amateurs, and you’re a pro. Cleaning those amateurs up with a flash of your blade would have been total overkill, I’m sure.

“Eh, you’re right, I suppose” he said, chuckling.

Is it just me, or is Mr. Fisalis’ smile on the dark side? His smile is usually so wonderful. But it looked more like a smirk. What was wrong?

Just as I was looking at him with doubtful eyes, somebody pushed his way through the spectators, shouting, “I heard those hooligans were at it again!!”

The speaker was well-built, and his garb resembled a knight’s uniform. He hastened over to us, and his eyes went wide when he spotted the ruffians lying on the ground.

“I say, they’re all out like a light!! So... who laid ’em flat?” he asked, scanning the crowd. And then he saw Mr. Fisalis at the center of it. “It... it’s you!! Young Sir— er, I mean, Your Excellency— don’t tell me *you* did this?”

“Young Sir”! Ah, right, that’s not what I should be focusing on. It was just way too amusing. In any case, given how he was able to tell that it was Mr. Fisalis who took those men down, this person must be an acquaintance of his.

At the words “Young Sir,” Mr. Fisalis’ handsome face twitched for a moment, but his expression quickly reverted to serious, dignified mode. “Ah, if it isn’t the Captain of the Guard. You’re quite late. So late, in fact, that I took the liberty of facing them myself. They were attempting to kidnap Viola, you see. You said they were ‘at it again,’ so I take it they’ve been terrorizing the town for some time? The big lugs did have some muscle on them, but they went down in seconds.” His tone was a little different from the tone he’d directed at the ruffians earlier, but it was still deep and intimidating.

So this is Le Pied’s Captain of the Guard. That must be why he instantly recognized Mr. Fisalis.

“Your predecessor was called to Rozhe, and while he’s been gone, these goons have taken advantage of the wartime confusion. My deepest apologies

for causing you trouble, Your Excellency,” he explained, bowing his head.

“It’s no big deal. I just did a little cleaning up. That aside, from what I’ve gathered, it seems the town’s public order has fallen precipitously. Might you have something to say with regard to that?”

“Yes, sir. Ever since the war began, the guards in several towns have been dispatched to escort individuals to the south. As such, the number of guards in Le Pied has dropped, and we’re short-handed,” he replied with an uncomfortable look on his face.

“Hrmm.”

The repercussions of the war were being felt all the way out here.

“They may not look like much, sir, but we were having a devil of a time catching them. Racketeering out on the streets, sneaking into homes and stealing valuables—the whole town was their oyster. Long story short, they were a bothersome bunch.”

“Take them away at once. I want to hear more about it from you, so be sure to visit me at my abode.”

“Understood, sir.”

The guard gave Mr. Fisalis a knight’s bow, after which he and the other similarly-dressed people who’d arrived at the scene (whom I could only assume were other guards) bound the miscreants up. They were each carried away atop multiple guards’ shoulders, like pallbearers with coffins.

“...Wow, they look heavy,” I remarked.

“Their size was all they had going for them.”

“Where are they taking them?”

“To the guard post in town. That’s where the jail cells are.”

I watched as the guards marched away. The once-thick crowd had dispersed, and the traffic had started up again as wagons and people both went about their business. The clamor of the streets returned as though nothing had happened.

“Now then...” Mr. Fisalis faced me once again. His expression was actually a tad frightening.

What’s this about? I wondered, my head tilting slightly in my puzzlement.

“Viola, did I not tell you, when we left for our stroll this morning, that you should never let go of my hand?”

Is Mr. Fisalis a little angry? His beautiful dark brown eyes were piercing straight through me.

“Yes, you did, but... that was out of my control.” When our hands unclasped, the caravan had been passing through. There was nothing either of us could do.

“Don’t give me that. If we hadn’t separated, none of that would have happened.”

“...True.” He certainly had a point, so I acknowledged it without fuss.

“I happened to be close at hand, so this ordeal ended without incident, but I shudder to think what might have happened if they’d managed to take you somewhere else instead.”

“...I apologize.”

“Had the kidnapping happened in Rozhe, it could have devolved into an even nastier affair.”

“...Because I’m a duchess, you mean?”

“Because you’re a duchess, yes.” He heaved a sigh. “And because you’re also my weak point.” Then he embraced me again. “People have begun to notice how important you are to me. You’re bound to be in the sights of some good-for-nothing scoundrel or other. Rozhe may be a land of peace, but there’s still no guarantee you won’t be targeted.”

“I’m so sorry! I didn’t really think of that...”

It wasn’t every day that Mr. Fisalis was angry at me, so I was super remorseful. I was too ashamed to face him, so I nestled my face into his chest. *That’s right. I’m a duchess, and I need to be more conscious of that. I’m no longer the destitute countess who would be told to “deal with it yourself” if I was ever kidnapped, simply because nobody had the money to pay ransom. Just*

today, I heard how crime had gotten a little rougher—heck, I saw that was the case with my own two eyes. And yet I left Mr. Fisalis’ side of my own accord. It never occurred to me that doing so could have led to such a mess. I should’ve just waited for him there. Ugh, I was such an idiot! Plus, it was only because Mr. Fisalis was able to step in so quickly that I got out unscathed. If they had actually managed to kidnap me, then... they said they were going to sell me, didn’t they? Yikes, that’s a scary thought! And even if they didn’t sell me off, if they caught wind of my peerage, they might have demanded a hefty ransom from the duke’s family! Double yikes! I was trembling at the thought.

I felt horrible for putting Mr. Fisalis in danger, and yet so grateful he had rescued me. *Thank you so much, Mr. Fisalis!! I can’t cause him or the people at the manor any more grief through my carelessness. From here on out, I’ll be more conscientious!*

Inwardly, I was sweating bullets; what Mr. Fisalis was saying was more than valid. But he picked up on my discomfort: “Forgive me, I didn’t mean to frighten you that much. I just want you to understand,” he said, his tone softening. He stroked my head reassuringly.

“I promise I do.”

“Good. As long as you understand. Now, let’s make for the cafe you mentioned earlier, shall we? I’m a bit too tired to resume strolling. Exerting oneself on an empty stomach is far from ideal,” he joked, taking my hand in his.

I chuckled. “...Okay.”

“Eating good food will boost our spirits.”

“Absolutely!” At last, I lifted my face from his chest and looked up. *Guess this is where I go, “That’s Mr. Fisalis for you.”*

The way to the cafe being clear, we eventually made it to our destination. The location was a brisk walk from the plaza. With its cute red awning and chic atmosphere, the cafe was the perfect place for a laidback teatime on a fine sunny day.

Inside the establishment, even the seats had a stately, dignified air to them. It was quite suited to those who wished to enjoy their tea calmly and quietly.

Outside, on the other hand, the copious tables were pure white, lending the place a cheerier, more casual feel. The townsfolk were indulging in their lunches and tea, made just the way they liked them, as they engaged in pleasant chitchat. We were led to our open-air table by a wonderful garçon, and once seated, we were handed menus. As we were discussing what to order—

“Hey, it’s you! The guy from before! Are you some kind of big shot?”

“Do you and the Captain of the Guard know each other?”

“Man oh man, you kicked so much ass back there.”

“Thank you so much for taking them down!”

“Is she your main squeeze? It must drive you nuts how cute she is.”

“She really is easy on the eyes!”

I could hear remarks from the tables around us. *Oh, he’s a big shot all right! He’s a noble, and a duke at that. How do you not know that?*

Despite picking up on his lofty social status, everyone around us was being super blunt; Mr. Fisalis was just smiling, so it couldn’t have bothered him too terribly.

“The way you rushed to his side... I’m jealous of how close you two are, miss!”

Oh yeah, I ran over to him while the whole crowd’s eyes were on me. How utterly embarrassing...

21 — Continuing Our Stroll

Lunch at the sidewalk cafe consisted of bread and a salad containing lots of local Le Pied vegetables, plus yet more veggies simmered in consomme. It was a delicious meal. Mr. Fisalis added a little meat to his portion.

Being seated at our table did nothing to quell the banter and comments that were directed at us, though.

“You really showed them what for! Plus, you and the Captain of the Guard clearly *do* know each other. You a knight from the capital or something?”

“All our guards went off to the war, so what say you move here?”

“You’re so pretty, miss.”

“You two make a great couple!”

But when our plates arrived, the incessant remarks naturally petered out as they left us to our meal. The mood in the air was actually quite nice and cozy.

But I’ll have that there gentleman know that Mr. Fisalis is indeed a knight. He’s more than just a knight, in fact—his rank is closer to the top! It’s crazy you don’t know that.

Just as Mr. Fisalis said, eating delicious food really does wonders for one’s mood. I didn’t exactly forget all about my *deep self-reflection*, but I definitely wasn’t feeling so down anymore.

“Where to next?” he asked, enjoying his post-meal tea.

“What else is there that’s worth seeing?” I had no idea what Le Pied was like; the scenery I’d viewed from inside our carriage was all I’d seen so far.

“Hmm, well...” He gave it some thought. “There are all the state churches, and small shops here and there. But that’s about it.”

“The whole town is so picturesque, so I don’t think it’s a bad idea to wander around while we take in the local architecture!”

“As you wish. Let’s just roam around soaking in the architecture before heading back to the villa.”

“Okay!”

And so we took our leave of the cafe. In the midst of our aimless stroll, I happened to spot the flower shop from earlier. *Come to think of it, I never did finish looking at the flowers. And I never apologized to that girl for drawing those thugs to her shop. I maybe ought to apologize by buying some flowers off her.*

“Mr. Fisalis, may we go check out that flower shop again?”

“Oh, that one? It’s fine by me. Let’s go.”

I pulled him by the hand toward the florist. The girl there remembered me (though I suppose it’s only natural she would, after all that). I’d been fretting over what to do if she gave me the cold shoulder, but she rushed over the second she saw me

“Miss! I’m so happy you’re okay!”

“I’m sorry about earlier. I caused trouble right in front of your store.”

“That’s all right! You two came out of it okay, and you beat those guys to a pulp for us! I can’t tell you what a relief it is that they finally got what was coming to them!”

She’s a nice girl, but she’s surprisingly full of energy, too! Arms akimbo, she snorted with derision and cursed them out. And she looked cute doing it.

“I didn’t get much of a look before, so I thought I’d swing by again to see what you have.”

“By all means!”

I once again stopped to admire the rare flowers. There were plenty besides the andreanums that I’d never seen before.

“You sure do like flowers,” said Mr. Fisalis, taking a look inside as I eagerly eyed the flowers, chatting with the girl all the while. “Do you have any favorites?”

“Well, um, they’re all brand new to me, and I think they’re really pretty, but we can’t take them with us all the way back to Rozhe... I mean, the climate in Rozhe isn’t right for them, and they’d just wilt, which would be a shame.”

“We can decorate the rooms in the villa with cut flowers, and any potted plants we buy we can take back to the manor in Rozhe. If the climate is a concern, we can just use the greenhouse. As for how to grow them, I’m sure if we talk to Bellis about it, he’ll help us out somehow.”

Mr. Fisalis coming in with the save! “Oh yeah! We’ve got Bellis! Our titan of an ally! ...And yet...”

We do have the Dark Prince himself— Er, the consummate professional that is Bellis! If we discuss it with him, he’ll tell us the right way to grow them! ...And now I really feel like buying them. And yet, to no one’s surprise, I haven’t got the pocket money. I plum forgot☆

Mr. Fisalis didn’t fail to notice me there, caught in my train of thought. “There you go worrying over nothing again. That’s so like you. So, which of these flowers speak to you?”

He was chuckling at me like I had a screw loose again. *Déjà vu. The same situation happened when I went on that outing at the capital.*

I knew arguing any further would be pointless, so I figured I’d just go ahead and point out the ones I liked. “Uhh, I think the andreanums—the ones with the heart-shaped leaves—are really cute.”

“Look at that! That leaf shape really is something. If we go back to the manor with these, everybody will be delighted, don’t you agree? I think they’ll make for splendid souvenirs, since I doubt they’ll have ever laid eyes on them.”

You knew just what to say, Mr. Fisalis! You’re a regular flower salesman! You’re absolutely right—we have the servants to consider! I’m sure most of them have never seen any flowers remotely like this, so they’ll love them for sure! And I did say I’d bring souvenirs. Mission accomplished!!

“Good thinking! I have a feeling they might take a shine to them.”

“Of course they will. There’s no doubt in my mind.”

“I just had a thought—while we admire the flowers, we can tell them all about Le Pied! About how lovely it looks, how big the market is with all those fruits and veggies... I just *know* they’ll be utterly delighted by these flowers!” My mind had already jumped to the travel stories we’d recount at the servants’ dining room back at the manor.

Now, where do I plant them? According to the florist, they can be grown in the capital if they’re getting enough sunlight. In which case I won’t need a greenhouse; my garden ought to be just fine. It’s just a corner of the garden, but it gets plenty of sun, and it’s nice and open! Speaking of my garden...

“Oh yeah! The flowers you bought me were planted in the garden!”

“Really? They were?”

“Yep! I figured you’d appreciate it if they were in bloom when you got back, so I planted them with Bellis and Mimosa. They’ll be so pretty! Damn, I totally forgot to show you them.”

“I’m happy to hear that. In fact, let’s go to see them first thing when we return to Rozhe.”

“Okay!”

While half of me was occupied with thoughts of our manor at the capital, the florist girl watched us chatting with a sunny smile and said, “Hee hee, you look like you’re on cloud nine, miss!”

The florist’s remark snapped me back to reality. Mr. Fisalis and I looked at each other, and then I glanced her way. She was gazing at us with flushed cheeks and a sparkle in her eyes! *Oh no... I’ve gone and done it again. I can’t be doing such things in front of a corner store florist! What am I even doing?*

For a brief moment, Mr. Fisalis actually seemed a bit taken aback, but he smiled warmly all the same. “Could you send ten of these potted ones to our manor in Montjuc?” he asked the florist.

At first, she was captivated by his winning grin, but his mention of the manor startled her. “Huh? Your manor in Montjuc, sir?” After hearing those words, she now seemed dimly aware of who Mr. Fisalis actually was. She suddenly straightened up, wide-eyed. “...Ah! Of... of course, sir!!”

After requesting the flowers be delivered to the villa, we took our leave of the shop, after which we whiled away many an hour window-shopping at the neighboring row of jewelry stores (without buying anything, of course) and taking in the local sights, such as the church located in the direction opposite the villa. *Look at the time! I think it's already almost teatime. Plus, Mr. Fisalis did tell the Captain of the Guard to come to the villa later, and we can hardly make him wait for us to show up.*

I was lost in thought as we walked, so our idle chatter had petered out. Mr. Fisalis must have thought I'd gone quiet because I was exhausted. "Shall we head back? Our *stroll* ended up taking quite some time; you must be tired, surely?"

I still had more energy than not, but it was true we'd had a full day. In fact, the day had been a little bit *too* full. We'd witnessed a street fight, seen a thief get nabbed, and to top it all off, I'd almost gotten kidnapped! I was exhausted more emotionally than physically.

"I suppose I am tired. Guess we ought to return home," I replied.

At that, Mr. Fisalis took my hand once again, and we set off toward Montjuc Hill.

22 — A Shocking Turn!

“Is the Captain here yet?” asked Mr. Fisalis.

“No, he isn’t. Is something the matter?”

“I told him to come here when we crossed paths in town earlier today. Direct him to the living room when he does arrive.”

“Yes, sir.”

I was a bit relieved he hadn’t shown up yet—we hadn’t ended up wasting any of his time. I sat down beside Mr. Fisalis on the living room sofa to seize a moment’s respite. I only realized how exhausted I truly was when I partook of the warm, delicious tea a servant brought in for me. As I sipped, I could feel the considerable fatigue from our very eventful stroll melt away. “Phew...” I closed my eyes and breathed in the tea’s aroma. My body was healing from the inside out. *If only I could sink right into the sofa!*

“I see even you have to run out of energy eventually, Viola. I can hardly blame you, given the day’s events.” He patted me on the hand, as a gesture of appreciation for what I’d gone through. Then, he gripped my hand tight as he continued. “Though when I think about you being manhandled by those criminal scum, my blood boils... For now, though, we should dispose of those clothes they’ve defiled with their filthy hands. Go change, Viola! On second thought—changing clothes won’t be enough, I think. Oh, I know! You need to go take a bath as well! On the double!”

“Come again?”

It seemed Mr. Fisalis’ wrath had returned upon reflecting back on today’s events, and now he was making erratic demands of me. How could I take a bath right this second if nobody had drawn one? What was he *on* about!?

Mr. Fisalis was in his own world now; he was paying my exasperation no heed. “The bath has got to come first. Rosa, prepare one for her, and quickly. Stellaria, prepare her a new set of clothes. And get rid of the clothes she has on

now.”

“Understood.”

Hold your horses! Don't just go ordering the servants around willy-nilly on my behalf!

“Wait, hold on, I can bathe and change out of these clothes later. It's no big deal, really!”

“It's a big deal to me! If you're not going to take a bath, then at least change clothes.”

“Excuse me!?”

“If you're going to make a fuss over it, I'll just *rip* them off!”

“Eeek! You're a sick, dirty pervert!”

Our verbal tug of war (“take a bath!” “no!” “change clothes!” “no!”) ended when we were informed of the Captain's arrival.

Nice timing ☆

“Allow me to apologize for troubling you earlier, Your Excellency!” he said, bowing so deeply he was bent over at a right angle. He'd been led to the living room by Fennel.

Mr. Fisalis bade him stop with a raised hand. “No, think nothing of it. Of course, if Viola had come to harm, it would be a different story... but all's well that ends well.”

If the servants' wide-eyed expressions were any indication, they were gobsmacked by the words that had just come out of Mr. Fisalis' mouth. I could swear I even heard their souls shout, “Are you for real!? Was he always the type to say something like that!?” but maybe I was just hearing things. In any case, the Captain was humbled by his words, but no more so than anybody else in his position might be.

Mr. Fisalis raised an eyebrow at the servants' reactions, but almost as soon as we'd noticed it, they'd all reverted to their original expressions. *Talk about a quick recovery!* They may have retired, but they were still the servants of a ducal house. And yet at Mr. Fisalis' remark, even these first-rate professionals

were unable to hide their shock. *Just what was their opinion of you before, Mr. Fisalis?*

Mr. Fisalis, for his part, must have decided to pay them no mind. Instead, he cleared his throat and returned his gaze to the Captain. “Never mind that, Captain. It’s my understanding from what I heard earlier that so many guards have been dispatched south thanks to the war that Le Pied is currently short-handed. My question is, if you’re having such a tough time cracking down on crime, then why didn’t you ask for my assistance? My personal squadron of knights has been in this territory the whole time. As such, you understand there was no reason for you to let public order deteriorate to this degree?”

The Captain was wiping his brow. “I can’t apologize enough, sir! I’ve been so busy due to your predecessor’s absence that I ended up putting off dealing with the situation. I heard he was summoned to the capital by order of the king, so I figured he’d have his hands full there, and I didn’t want to inconvenience him with what amounted to a band of ruffians out in the country, so I felt reluctant to contact—”

“Enough. When all is said and done, you avoided bringing it up out of a misguided thoughtfulness, correct?”

“Yes, sir. That is correct,” said the Captain, head hanging in shame.

“If that thoughtfulness results in crime running amok, then what use is it?” he scolded, coming off more severe than usual. His typically kind eyes had turned cold.

“You’re too right, sir, too right.” In his obsequious humility, the Captain was practically cringing with his entire body.

By the look of it, their talk was leading to the matter of Le Pied’s security force. *Maybe I’m a third wheel here. If I’m hanging around and listening to them discuss delicate political matters, they’ll probably feel like they have to watch what they say. It might be better if I just take my leave here.*

I glanced at Rohtas, but he just shook his head slightly. *Well, that’s out of the ordinary. Is he telling me to stay? I still think I should probably just read the room and run off.*

“If you’ll excuse me,” I said, rising up from the sofa.

But Rohtas stopped me midway with his arm outstretched. “Please, you should listen, too.”

“Huh? Ah, okay.” I plopped back down beside him. *Um, are you sure it’s okay if someone like me’s hanging around? This is important stuff! I don’t really feel needed here, but everybody wants me to stay. All right then, I’ll be good and stay put.*

The conversation resumed once more. As the Captain put it:

“Ever since the most recent war with Aurantia broke out, the majority of the town’s guards have been deployed to the southern portion of the territory, resulting in a sharp reduction in raw manpower available for Le Pied’s security. Le Pied was hardly crime-ridden before, and the judgment was made that it would be fine even if the number of guards in town went down. But that failed to take your predecessor’s absence into account. Due to his absence—that is to say, the absence of an authority figure—the next thing I knew, public safety had devolved to the extent you witnessed today. I’m not blaming him, of course! It’s all my fault; I’m out of my depth, sir! I’m not worthy to have taken up the responsibility of leading in his absence... I cannot apologize enough, sir.”

Apologies don’t get much more earnest than that. Honestly, though, that five-man gang was the worst of the crime in town. It appeared that the rest amounted to small-time brawls and petty burglaries, which the few remaining guards in Le Pied and the upstanding townsfolk dealt with in their way.

Life in the capital hadn’t changed appreciably, despite the ongoing war, but I should have realized the war would affect the lands outside the capital. *I’m embarrassed at myself for being so ignorant and carefree. I’m sorry, world.*

While I was engaging in some serious self-reflection, Mr. Fisalis and the Captain continued their discussion.

Mr. Fisalis had his arms crossed, a hard look on his face. “It’s all because the guards are concentrated in the south for the time being... and it would take time to send aspirants to Rozhe for the necessary training in order to swell their ranks. Not to mention we can’t ask them to focus solely on increasing the number of guards in this one territory of ours. It would throw off the overall

balance of security forces throughout the kingdom.”

“Indeed, sir,” said the Captain, nodding meekly.

Guardsmen were actually civil servants dispatched by the nation, and belonged to a low-level section of the military. Many used to be gung-ho active-duty knights, and those who wanted to be a guard without being a knight first still had to endure knightly training at the capital. As such, unless one already had a considerable amount of skill and prowess, becoming an official guardsman took time.

From what I’d witnessed back in town, the Captain of the Guard had elegantly performed a proper knight’s salute. And moments ago when he’d stepped into the living room, he’d bowed at a very precise angle. He must have had experience serving as a knight when he was younger.

Well, putting that aside, I find it odd that all they’ve been talking about is “increasing the number of official guardsmen.” I mean, there’s an obvious, better solution, isn’t there? At first I thought I’d just sit there and listen, but I just couldn’t hold back any longer. “Um, could I say something, if I may?” I asked, breaking in when the opportunity presented itself.

“What is it?” replied Mr. Fisalis without delay.

“Um, well, uhhh...” I hesitated—was it really my place to speak up all high and mighty like this?

“Is something wrong? Do you have something to say?”

Well, he’s not telling me to shut up, so out with it, I guess. “If we can’t increase the number of guards, then why don’t we organize a community watch group?”

“A *what?*” Mr. Fisalis and the Captain were taken aback. To them, this was coming out of nowhere.

Did the idea really never occur to you guys? I saw what looked basically like a community watch group back in town already. You know, people breaking up fights, chasing down robbers, that sort of thing. Wouldn’t it make sense to formalize what’s already more or less there? In my family’s territory, our community watch group was just a fact of life everyone took for granted. I guess

that isn't necessarily the case everywhere, huh? Maybe what's common sense where I lived is regarded as silly elsewhere! What if they think I'm an idiot?

"A "community watch group," you say. Could you tell us more?" said Mr. Fisalis.

Everyone's eyes, the servants' included, were on me, so I went into how we did it in my territory. "My territory never had many guards to begin with, so the people created a self-policing body. Being minor nobility, we couldn't tactfully request an increase in guards."

That's right—my territory's security scheme, too, was handled internally, and by the common folk at that. My land was nowhere near as important as this duchy, so we didn't exactly have many guards stationed there.

"I see. A watch group composed primarily of citizens... So, how were they trained in physical combat? In swordsmanship?" asked Mr. Fisalis, intrigued.

"That, the countdom's guards saw to. As they trained, they would also instruct the community watch. And given this place has so many official guards compared to my territory, not to mention all the ducal knights, couldn't they draw more highly-trained watchmen from their ranks?"

"Shortage of guards" my butt. You've still definitely got more than my land does. I'm green with envy here!

"That's a fair point."

"Some community watch members would also end up wanting to become actual guardsmen. We would arrange for them to receive training in Rozhe. Moreover, people are coming back from the war every day, aren't they? I'm sure some of them could return to their old jobs, but the ones that can't tend to end up resorting to... not-so-great alternatives.. If there are more people looking for work here than there are jobs, then I think a community watch could also serve as an avenue of employment. The community watch may be a voluntary, unsalaried service, but its members are usually rewarded for their efforts protecting the townsfolk through donations. That's how we managed to operate ours."

We didn't have money to pay them, exactly, but we did collect food for them

to share amongst themselves. That was how we compensated them for their service. When one's coffers are empty, we just use our heads ☆ As for supplies, each individual member of the watch contributed what they could.

"That sounds like a splendid idea," said the Captain. Initially, the Captain had listened to what I had to say with a little skepticism, but his stern expression had given way to a smile. "If we implement it, we can maintain the public order in town without having to worry about wars or shifts in national policy changing anything. Dear me, little miss—you may be young, but you have a good head on your shoulders!"

Tee hee. Did you hear those words of praise!? And here all I did was share a little bit of pauper's wisdom!

"She's not 'little miss' to you," grumbled Mr. Fisalis. "She's *Viola*. My wife."

I can't have been the only person to notice the "uh-oh" look on the Captain's poor face. "Ah, you mean she's your...! For-forgive me, sir, this is the first I've had the pleasure of meeting her! Ha, haha..." he said, his smile strained.

Mr. Fisalis evidently elected to ignore him. "What's the current employment situation in the territory like, Fennel?"

"It hasn't changed much in Le Pied, sir, even now that the war is on. However, in rural areas, people are often left without work in the off season. Furthermore, just as Madam observed earlier, many residents who participated in the war effort as volunteer soldiers have returned, and I believe her solution may be the most suitable means of giving them work. As such, I'm of the opinion that a great deal of the citizenry will likely approve of her proposal," he replied, with complete confidence.

That's Rohtas' butlering teacher for you!

Mr. Fisalis paused to think. "Hmm... I see. Let's give the community watch a try, shall we? I'll explain the idea to Father. What do you think, Rohtas? Do you think it's in the cards?"

"I think we can work out the little details later down the line, but no, I don't believe the expense will be an issue," he answered, no less smoothly than his old mentor. He never failed to impress!

“Then it’s settled; now we just need to work towards that goal. I bid you make the necessary preparations as well, Captain. Set your sights on young men of physical prowess, as well as any able-bodied residents in search of work.”

“Yes, sir.”

Just like that, the community watch project was given the go-ahead. Then...

“Thank you for speaking up, Viola. We would never have thought of such a brilliant idea on our own.”

“Oh my... Don’t mention it; I just told you how we do things in my territory, that’s all!” Mr. Fisalis had bowed his head, so I felt incredibly humbled.

Mr. Fisalis’ next words to the Captain had me wide-eyed with shock. “I’m very interested to see whether the community watch functions as intended, so expect me to drop by whenever it’s practical from now on.”

Wait, what? Did he just say what I think he said!? Until now, he’s left this territory completely in his in-laws’ hands, hasn’t he!?

And I was far from the only one completely floored by this development. Everyone did a double take, even the group from the capital. *Boy, it’s been a while since I’ve seen Rohtas that nonplussed!*

The only one who couldn’t read the room was the Captain. *I bet he thinks it’s only natural that Mr. Fisalis doesn’t come to his territory more often, probably assuming he’s busy with knight stuff in the capital. He’s not totally on the mark there, but I’m not about to make a peep about it.*

Their reactions hadn’t, however, eluded Mr. Fisalis. “What? Is my coming here a bad idea?” he asked sullenly.

It’s your fault they’re all boggling at you, dummy! With how you totally neglected the place before now, of course they’d react this way if you suddenly come out with an “I’ll basically run the territory now.” Get a clue already!

“That’s not it,” Rohtas replied promptly, smiling wryly.

But Mr. Fisalis’ next remark made him completely freeze up. “I am sorry about my past conduct, you know. And I’m fully aware that in order to truly repent, words alone won’t cut it. I know that my words carry no weight, and that I

haven't entirely earned your trust yet, so I intend to demonstrate how much I've changed through my behavior going forward. I do plan to enlist Father's help in governing the territory, but I wish to do everything I can myself as well."

No way!! So he's aware of how impossible he used to be!?

23 — Pressed for Answers

Time had frozen inside the living room of the ducal villa. As it happened, Mr. Fisalis had, in fact, been aware of how dreadful his past behavior really was. To think he'd acknowledge exactly what a fool he'd been— Ah, was I going overboard there?

It was definitely a yikes moment... or rather, it was a portent of a cataclysm to come! Well, maybe that was a bit much. *You didn't hit your head at some point, did you, Mr. Fisalis? Wait—maybe that actually did happen during today's scuffle!*

Ahem. I mean, looks like they're not the only ones who are all shaken. Honestly, with the exception of the Captain and Stellaria, I'm the one who's suffered the least from his indiscretions out of all of us, and yet I'm still this shocked. I can only imagine what a mind-blowing turn this is for all of the servants, who have had to deal with him for far longer! Ah, Mr. Fennel, sir, make sure your soul doesn't escape through your mouth!! Maybe the shock was too much for an elderly man like him.

Mr. Fisalis was staring at the frozen specimens that used to be his servants. He coughed and cleared his throat, his expression turning serious. "In any case, discuss the matter of the community watch with your men at the guard post. I'm going to work out the details from my end as well, so let's meet again at a later date. Today's talk is over; you may leave," he said, providing the Captain an escape from the off-putting mood hanging over the room. It had nothing to do with him, after all.

"Yes, sir, and thank you. I shall be going."

Nice call, Mr. Fisalis. I mean, it wouldn't do to give people outside the family any more information that they could use to figure out all our private affairs.

Upon seeing the Captain rise from the sofa, Rohtas wasted no time moving to open the door. *He may have gotten the shock of his life nary a moment ago, but that's Rohtas for you!* With the Captain now safely ushered out, only the ducal

family and its staff were left. A peculiar silence fell over the room—everybody was watching Mr. Fisalis closely, waiting to see what he'd do next. And it probably fell on either him or me to break that silence.

Welp, guess it's time to be brave and cut straight to the heart of the matter!
“Um, Mr. Fisalis? Do you really plan on implementing the community watch project?”

I was more than aware of all the *“that's what you're bringing up!?”* being silently directed at me by the shocked servants. *But being overly straightforward is a dicey proposition. I'll get to the crux of all this, I promise, but please let me chip in slowly from the periphery.*

“Yep, I sure do. And later, I'd like to ask you more about it. On that thought, I ought to talk to your father about it, too. Might I be allowed to pay the count's manor a visit after we return to Rozhe?” The project was beginning to take shape in his mind.

“I'm sure my father will be okay with that. And we can talk about anything you like, if you don't mind that you'll be talking to little old *me* about it.” Given that it seemed he truly intended to get the community watch up and running, I was quite willing to pitch in however I could. It was gratifying to see him concerned for the welfare of his territory! No more doubting him, definitely.

“Much obliged. Your idea is fantastic,” he said, his expression cheerful.

Okay, time to get to the real essence of all this. “...On a more important note, Mr. Fisalis, can you really afford to expend so much effort on the territory when you're so busy with your knightly duties?”

...How's that? Did I get closer to the crux? I glanced at Rohtas, and he nodded slightly. *Good, looks like I'm on the right track.*

So far, the reason he'd supposedly been neglecting the governance of the territory was because he was just too busy with his other work. At the very least, that was what the residents of the territory believed.

...That is what they think, right? Please let that be what they think!!

Ahem, sorry about screaming internally.

In reality, the only thing their lord had been busy with was gallivanting around with his mistress. If the people of this land came to know he'd abandoned his responsibilities towards them like that, it would throw a wrench in his efforts to govern going forward.

"I know that I can't realistically go at it full force so suddenly, but I must at least go at it a little at a time. If I deferred my duties to Father indefinitely because 'I'm busy with my work in Rozhe,' I would never grow as a person."

His facial features look so firm. This must be "work mode," or, I guess, "serious mode." It's different from his usual sweet smile, but it's just as wonderful.

...Wait, what did he just say!?

"Huh? HUH?"

Did I just, like, mishear him? But, but those dignified eyes! M-Mr. Fisalis! He's being for real right now!!

"As I said before, I will be demonstrating how much I've changed through my actions, not my words. The timing is perfect, as governing the territory will serve as a starting point. I do have work to do in Rozhe, so I won't be able to make it here *too* often, but that might work to my advantage. It will allow me to drop in unannounced to inspect goings-on."

I know I'm not just hearing things now! From his lips to our ears, those words came in loud and clear! Like, whoa though. He really isn't playing!!

"That... that sounds great!" I said.

"Young Master...!"

"Sir!"

The eyes of the servants, who had at first been struck dumb by Mr. Fisalis' sudden earnestness about this whole territory business, were now all a-sparkle.

Has he found salvation through acceptance of his lot in life?

Fennel's eyes were choked with emotion as he stared at Mr. Fisalis.

The whole villa was deeply moved, wrapped in a slightly odd but wonderful sense of catharsis.

Mr. Fisalis finally broke the silence, steering back to the topic of governing the territory. “It takes half a day’s travel to reach Le Pied from Rozhe. Please, Viola —accompany me, and lend me your wisdom.”

“Huh? My wisdom?”

“Precisely. When it comes to managing a territory, you seem far more well-informed than me.”

“Huh? But my wisdom is just the wisdom of the poor, nothing more.” Sure, I did have a little experience handling various things with my parents back home, but it was all in service to my grand plan to escape from the pit of poverty. I didn’t know whether my experience administering a destitute countdom would prove all that useful.

Mr. Fisalis saw the dubious look on my face and chuckled. “It’s not as though throwing money at every problem is necessarily good governance. Am I wrong?”

Is he pressing me for answers!? I cannot believe the words coming out of his mouth right now! I mean, didn’t he used to think that money could make anybody happy!? I could feel my eyes shoot open as wide as they could possibly go in my surprise, and I stared at him, but his face was extremely no-nonsense. Wait, hold up a minute. This is too much for me to keep up with. I’m getting battered by wave after shocking wave. I need to calm down. Oh yeah, Rohtas! Rohtas, save me!!

I snuck a glance at Rohtas, eyes pleading, but even the typically calm and collected Rohtas’ eyes were just as wide as mine. I was glad Rohtas was standing behind Mr. Fisalis. If Mr. Fisalis had been able to see him, he would for sure say something like, “What’s with that reaction?” and get all sulky.

The maids were teary-eyed. The most senior among them was actually weeping, and Stellaria (the most calm and collected among them) was consoling her. The servants were usually so perfect and professional, but what had happened today had broken their composure.



And who could blame them? Ever since he had inherited the title of duke—or maybe even since before then—he'd been wrapped around his lover's little finger, and he'd dispensed with everything apart from the barest trappings of his public office. Moreover, he'd always been a spoiled silver spoon type who believed he could resolve any issue by tossing some coins from his eye-wateringly massive coffer at it! One could only wonder how much anxiety had dwelt in the hearts of all the servants... Anybody in their position would start crying if that kind of man suddenly started saying things like, "From now on, I'll do my best to govern the territory, too" and "Throwing money at everything isn't the way to go." It was like he'd had a complete change of heart.

"That's how it's going to be now, Viola, so let me thank you in advance."

Mr. Fisalis actually bowed his head slightly! What the heck was going on here? Once again I looked at Rohtas, as though pleading with him to save me, but he simply nodded up and down, as though he agreed with Mr. Fisalis' statement.

Augh! Are you telling me to accompany him on his territory inspections?

...Rohtas must really be a Mr. Fisalis fan today.

The other servants were looking at me, their hands balled into fists. The looks in their eyes were intense, to say the least. I guess you could say I couldn't resist the pressure.

"If you're okay having the likes of me around... I'll join you." Everybody's expectations were starting to pile up on my shoulders, so I had no choice but to say yes. But I really wasn't super confident I'd be of any use.

At my affirmative response, Mr. Fisalis smiled in visible relief. "Excellent! As of now, I'd be inadequate in numerous ways if I tried going it alone, so having you by my side is quite reassuring. Eventually, I hope you and I can take on all the things Rohtas used to do for me, but I'm sure that I lack all of the necessary skills for that as of yet. I've truly given Rohtas so much trouble, and for that I apologize," he told him, staring at him with a slightly raised eyebrow.

M-Mr. Fisalis!? ...That's the second "M-Mr. Fisalis" today! But he totally just apologized! To Rohtas!! The poor man had only just reverted to business-as-usual mode, only to find himself staring open-mouthed at Mr. Fisalis once

again.

So is today, like, Repentance Day for Mr. Fisalis or what!? And is he using this as a chance to air his true feelings while he's at it!?

That was more or less what we were all thinking as we stared, gobsmacked, at him.

"Of course, it's not just Rohtas who's had to suffer so much worry over the years because of me. I must apologize to Mother and Father, and to the other servants as well." He cast down his eyes, and even started to tear up.

Self-reflection, repentance, whatever you called it... we were receiving it. *Wow, he's not just saying that, is he?*

The villa living room was absurdly quiet now. Nobody uttered a peep, let alone stirred from their spots.

"From now on, I will get my act together as a proper lord— No, a proper head of the ducal house... Excuse me, have I said something peculiar?" he huffed, having picked up on the silence. But he was just getting indignant to distract from his embarrassment.

None of the servants spoke up, so I chose to speak for them. "You didn't say anything peculiar at all. It's just that suddenly you're confessing your innermost feelings like this. Everyone's just surprised. If you showed your change of heart through your actions, then those feelings would be obvious, right? Ah, but I do think if you use your words in addition to your actions, it'll be easier for everyone to understand where you're coming from."

"You're right."

"Yes, I am. Words plus actions. Then your feelings can't possibly fail to come through!"

"Thank you," said Mr. Fisalis, smiling. "Argh, can you believe this? I feel as though I've been talking too much. I'm going to get some fresh air." Mr. Fisalis got to his feet—he must have been feeling quite embarrassed. He put his hand on the door and looked my way. "I'll be back by supper time..."

Okay. Everyone's sneaking glances at me. Why's everyone doing that, Mr.

Fisalis? Of course, the sun's about to go down, so I mean sure, there's some time before supper. It ought to be enough time for the servants to pull themselves together again.

Rohtas covertly glanced my way, and mouthed, "Why don't you go too?"

No, I couldn't possibly. He wants to be alone right now, doesn't he? You're just misreading the situation, Rohtas. But then I looked at Stellaria, who mouthed, "Please go after him."

You too, Stellaria? All right then. Guess he must want me to go follow him, after all.

...Though honestly, if that's the case, he should have just told me that.

"May I go with you?" I asked.

"Yes! Yes, of course!"

And they were right. Mr. Fisalis smiled enthusiastically, cheerfully doubling back to escort me.

...You seriously should have just told me, though.

24 — A Heart-to-Heart

Mr. Fisalis led me outside the villa, either to distract himself from how flustered he was after bearing his whole soul like that, or to give the servants the time they needed to collect themselves. Not that I thought my leaving the villa was really all that necessary. I almost suspected that Rohtas, Stellaria, and the rest just wanted me gone for a spell. *I'm sure they're all huddled in a circle right now. I can see it now. I would have loved to be a part of it, but... they've banished me.*

The sun was about to set. Mr. Fisalis and I were walking down the hill road, hand in hand. *Wonder where we're going?*

Mr. Fisalis hadn't said a word since we'd left the villa. He just kept looking ahead, so I had no idea where our destination might be. I knew there would be even more lowlifes prowling around once it got dark, so I figured he couldn't possibly be taking us very far. I continued to follow silently. *But if we continue down this path, we'll eventually end up in town again...*

In the end, however, we veered onto a side road that diverged at a point not too far from the villa. The "side road" was actually more like a game trail, so I hadn't noticed it this morning. But Mr. Fisalis was striding down it purposefully, so it must have led somewhere.

"Um, Mr. Fisalis?" I ventured nervously.

"What is it?" He finally turned to look at me.

"Is there something down this way?"

"Hmm, well... you can be the judge of that."

What does THAT mean?

...Ahem. I looked up at him with probing eyes, but he just chuckled.

"Don't worry; please just keep following me."

"Um, sure?" My head was still titled in puzzlement. He started walking again,

pulling me by the hand.

Mr. Fisalis finally stopped walking at a point that wasn't visible from the road that led into town. It was just a slight slope with nothing noteworthy in sight. I looked around, wondering if this was the destination he was so keen to get to. It was then that I noticed how this was the only place I'd seen so far where the weeds had been neatly removed. It was almost like a lawn, but the space was so small only about four adults could stand inside it. Where had he brought me?

"Mr. Fisalis?"

"This place... I liked coming here, when I was a kid," he replied, smiling cheerfully while pointing down beyond the hill. I turned to look, and Le Pied's townscape spread out before my eyes.

The sun was setting, sinking below the edge of the mountains, and its rays painted the whole town an even more vivid red (what with the red stones used for all the buildings!). The lighting was simply gorgeous.

"Wow! It's so pretty! It's like the whole town is one big ruby!" I heaved a sigh in spite of myself.

I see. Even I, here for the first time, am getting swept up by the majesty of the view. I can see why Mr. Fisalis would come to love this place for its superb scenery!

"It is, isn't it? I've loved this place since I was a kid. I figured this was the perfect place to cool my head a bit. I can feel it working its magic already." He was smiling peacefully as he gazed down at the town below.

So, this place is kept so neat because Mr. Fisalis is fond of it! But he hasn't visited the territory in so long. Since this spot is still so bereft of weeds, that must mean someone (the villa gardener or somesuch, I'm sure) has been sparing it their thoughts and effort this whole time.

The territory villa was staffed by the older servants from the manor in the capital. As such, there was a collection of servants who had doted on Mr. Fisalis when he was a callow young man. *At the end of the day, Mr. Fisalis really is loved. And my soul has benefited greatly from the servants' kindness, too!*

Mr. Fisalis sat down in the first spot that caught his eye and stretched out his

long legs, placing his hands on the ground behind his back. He sighed while watching the setting sun. “When I relax like this, I start feeling embarrassed again.”

Embarrassed from how you poured your heart out earlier? I feel you.

“For so long, I just did as I pleased. ...I owe Rohtas and Dahlia so much,” he continued, as he gazed down at the shining red of Le Pied.

So he brought me here because he was too embarrassed to tell me about these things within earshot of the others. Don't worry, I'll gladly hear you out! And I see that reserved half-smile. That's the smile of self-deprecation; I'd know it anywhere.

As a newcomer to the family, I couldn't really say anything, so I decided to simply lend an ear to hear what he had to say.

“I completely left the territory to Father, Rohtas, and others besides. And I completely left affairs in the manor to Rohtas and Dahlia. Honestly, what was I doing with myself all this time?”

You were fooling around with your girlfriend, is what.

...Ah, sorry, that was blunt. But it's also just the truth.

Granted, while he'd abandoned the territory and the manor, he'd always followed through on his duties as a knight. All of his subordinates vouched for him, so I didn't doubt that. *But for Rohtas to have managed both the territory and the manor... He's incredible! Rohtas, you're allowed to get angry. I'll back you up!*

...or so my heart cried out. Ah, don't worry—I wouldn't say that out loud. I was just spurring Mr. Fisalis on with “uh-huh”s, my face a docile mask. Don't call me a chicken for it ☆

“But there's no changing the past,” he continued. “I'll just have to make up for all of that going forward. Boy, have I got my work cut out for me.” He looked up at me, smiling wryly.

Um, if Rohtas seriously did all of the work you were supposed to do this whole time, I don't think a wry smile's going to cut it, mister. I shudder to think of the

righteous indignation he will unleash.

“You do have a lot of work ahead of you, but I’m sure Rohtas and the servants will help out. You’ll be all right.” *They’ve been with you this whole time. They never gave up on you. And those outstanding men and women would certainly never miss this chance to set you on the right path, now that you’re trying to turn over a new leaf!*

“I’m truly glad I have such a dependable staff.”

“As well you should be! You need to value them more, and take good care of them too!”

“Ha ha ha! I will, promise.” He paused. “...So much has changed since you came into my life, Viola. The manor, the servants... I never knew they were so full of life, or that they could work with such a spring in their steps. Maybe it was my fault they weren’t like that before you came. But never mind that—the biggest things that changed are my own feelings. I feel like I wasn’t seeing things clearly before. Like my vision has only just become unclouded.”

Wait, we were talking about his repentance and the servants, and now we’re suddenly talking about me? I looked down at him in amazement.

He pulled his handkerchief from his breast pocket and laid it down beside him, patting it in invitation as he looked up at me. *I guess that means I should sit down. Guess it’s kind of dumb I’ve been listening to him on my feet. Don’t even really know why I was doing that.*

I sat down obediently. *I’m sorry I was looking down on you—literally!*

Mr. Fisalis turned his gaze back to the townscape. “When Callie unceremoniously dumped me, it didn’t affect me that deeply. But when you said you didn’t think anything of me, I was surprised I was able to bear it more than I thought I would,” he said, again with a wry smile.

Ah, right, I remember that little rough patch! I did say that! I mean, he came at me with, “I like you now, so I broke up with Callie” so suddenly. What was I supposed to make of it?

“But Mr. Fisalis, you were going to marry me *because* she was so important to you.”

“Initially, yes.”

“You said you’d come to care for me, but you showed no sign of that whatsoever, so it came pretty much out of nowhere.”

“...Oh, I think I did show *some* signs...”

“You did? Because I didn’t get that at all.” I truly hadn’t noticed. I just remembered thinking we were conversing a little more than before, and he was being a little nicer.

“The others probably did pick up on it, I reckon...” he mumbled quietly.

I didn’t hear exactly what he said. He was scratching the tip of his nose and facing away from me.

Oh well, whatever.

“I will say, when a complete stranger—and someone who was so much higher than me he might as well be standing on a cloud—asked me out of nowhere to become his show wife because he already had a girlfriend, I consented. And yet before I knew it, you broke up with her... because you were interested in me now. And *then* you suddenly wanted us to be a normal married couple. It’s all been too much for me to keep up with. Feelings this, feelings that. It’s all fine for you, Mr. Fisalis—you’ve always been true to your own feelings. But what about me? What about my feelings?”

Ack, I ended up speaking my mind again. But it sure feels good to let it out.

I didn’t dislike Mr. Fisalis. He didn’t treat me poorly, even when there was no real affection between us. *In fact, I feel like he’s only begun to be remotely interesting to me recently. This is the first time I’ve felt this way, so even I’m not sure what I’m feeling.*

At first, Mr. Fisalis had been staring at me with wide-eyed astonishment. “Urggh. There’s so much I could say right now, but I’ll put it all aside for now... I think I did wrong by you.” He cast his gaze down, and I couldn’t help but notice his long lashes.

“Might it not be the case that you hurt *her* more than you’ve hurt me?”

“Callie and I have come to an understanding, so no worries there. But there is

something I've done to you that's unacceptable."

"Really?"

"Yes. And furthermore, there's something I've never been able to tell you."

"...What might that be?"

I had no idea. I looked into his dark brown eyes.

"A simple 'I'm sorry.' I pushed you into a terrible contract, and tied your whole life down. I want to properly apologize to you for how utterly selfish I was," he said, his face tightening as he wrapped my hand in his hands and stared straight into my eyes.

25 — A True Vow

Mr. Fisalis said “sorry”!? To me!? Well, well, well—first he spills his guts to the servants, and now he apologizes to me!! *What’s gotten into you today, Mr. Fisalis!?*

I peered into his beautiful dark brown eyes. He was looking at me with a steady gaze, so I was sure he wasn’t pulling my leg.

And yet, unlike the servants, I’d never felt particularly put upon by him, so I didn’t think he really *needed* to apologize to me. I mean, he said he “tied me down” under those horrible terms, but he shouldered my family’s debt, and provided me with food, clothing, and shelter. And all I had to do in return was just accept that he had a mistress. If it hadn’t been a sweet deal, I wouldn’t have decided to be his show wife.

In fact, by rejecting his lover (or, I guess, getting rejected by her?) and turning to me instead, that was technically violating the deal. As a result, my fun “life as a wife” (read: life as a servant) was crumbling away right before my eyes. What’s that? I should think of this not as a violation of the deal, but as the start of a happy ending?

...Err, I guess my thoughts could use some sorting out. But anyway.

“I didn’t need you to apologize to me. I really don’t think anything of it. Granted, those terms may seem dastardly when taken by themselves, but there was plenty in it for me, so...”

Thanks to his generous act of shouldering our family debt, that little problem had been settled once and for all, and I was quite content to spend the rest of my life romance-free in exchange for the status and prestige of being a duchess. If that wasn’t an amazing deal, I don’t know what is!! In any case, I thought saying all of that would lessen his feelings of guilt, if only a little. And yet...

“Hearing that you think nothing of it... that’s the most painful thing of all...”

Ah, he’s getting teary-eyed. I need to patch things up! “It-It’s true that any

lady who actually fancied you would think those terms unbearable. But I guess I just lost interest in men in general, so it really wasn't a bother for me at all! The servants at the manor all treat me well, and I never felt lonely—even when you weren't around, Mr. Fisalis!"

I could've continued by saying "Actually, I had *more* fun when you weren't around" but if I had, he'd have been well and truly crushed.

Wait... that's weird. His head's only been hanging lower and lower the more I talk.

"You just shot me straight through the heart, but I shouldn't bring that up now..." he muttered.

Huh? Did that fail to patch things up? Oh no, we can't have that. I really need to cheer him up! "Ah, but, uhh, you've changed for the better recently, Mr. Fisalis! I mean, you totally asked Rohtas, Dahlia, and Mimosa what I like, didn't you? What sorts of books I like, what sorts of food I like, all of that stuff. Dahlia clued me in to that fact, and I was so happy to hear that. And when the hubbub over that 'new lover' of yours was happening, you leaped in to quash that without caring about appearances."

"I... uh, true, I guess..." Mr. Fisalis lifted his head back up, but he wasn't looking me right in the eye, and he was scratching his cheek. Was he feeling *shy*? Before long, he stopped averting his gaze and looked me right in the eyes; clearly he'd screwed up his resolve. "...Right, so, how do you feel about me now?"

"I like you," I said without delay. Mr. Fisalis' eyes widened with wonderment, and suddenly he closed the distance between us.

Wow, he's so close now, though.

"Really!?"

"Yep! You're like family!"

"Huh? Not like... a husband...?"

"Just like family!"

Mr. Fisalis said nothing.

"You're family to me, just like everybody at the manor!"

"...I see. So I'm family. But that's progress. I'll take it! Baby steps!" he murmured, staring.

I could hear him loud and clear, but I did him the favor of pretending not to.

"Oh, and when you took down those ruffians earlier, I started to think of you as dependable, too."

"Did that make you feel closer to me?"

"It did!" I said, nodding enthusiastically.

His eyes softened. "Now I know that the way I phrased things wasn't reaching you."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you remember when I said 'what I want most is for you to stand by my side, like a normal couple, without all this contract business'?"

"Huh? Uhh, umm, oh yeah, I remember! I do. Of course I do." *That must've been right after that big fight.*

Mr. Fisalis saw right through me and reminded me. "I'm talking about the day we had that big discussion with Callie."

Phew. I was on the money after all. I smirked, relieved.

"I also said something else later on. Something similar."

"Uhhh..." *When was this?* I averted my gaze, trying to remember.

"Before I went off to war. The day I very nearly leaked intelligence to my *treasured wife.*"

Please don't give me that impish smile, Mr. Fisalis. "Ah..." That did ring a bell... He said that in front of the chivalric order, right...?

"Do you remember now? I suppose it never made an impression on you, since I spoke of my feelings in such forgettable ways. So allow me to rephrase."

"Rephrase?"

"Yes. You've become an incredibly important person to me, Viola. I *love* you.

So from here on out, I'm going to shield you from harm. For the rest of time, in fact. And I think I'll atone for my misdeeds by striving to make you feel thankful and blessed that you married me."

Huh!? Say what now? Ah, once again, my emotions just can't keep up with all this.

"Uhh, I mean... I already feel plenty happy with my life," I replied nervously.

"Does that happy life involve me?" He smiled, but it seemed an evil smile.

I feel like he's staring right into my soul. Man, he's sharp today.

"...Aha ☆"

"I'd just like to become part of your happy life. Of course, I'd really like to be the *center* of it, but that's not possible at the moment. I'm satisfied just being close to you. Earlier I said it'd be my atonement, but honestly I just want to be the one to make you happy, regardless."

It looked as though my pasted-on grin wasn't fooling anybody, because he smiled wryly in response to it. "You don't have to atone for me. Like I said before, it really didn't bother me at all."

"Then I'll be quietly atoning for myself. All I really want is to make your life a happy one by my own hand. That reminds me—putting a smile on your face involves *keeping an orderly home*, right? 'Men who can easily manage their jobs, their territories, and their homes are so amazing', right?"

"Huh?" *Wait, I remember that line from somewhere...*

"Wasn't it you who said those words?" he said, grinning devilishly.

"Oh yeah!!!" *If I recall, I, uhh, think I said that to my mother during the ceremony celebrating his return... no way, Mr. Fisalis—were you eavesdropping!? To think that casual remark would be overheard.* I repeatedly opened and closed my mouth in surprise, not knowing what to say. *If I'm not misremembering, Mr. Fisalis suddenly appeared from behind and startled me. He must've been listening in!*

...You think he's going to start working overtime? Nah.

Seeing me in my flustered state, Mr. Fisalis only chuckled even more. "That's

the reason I thought I'd do all the things I'd neglected to do by hiding myself away in my work. In addition to the fact that I need to make up for burdening Rohtas and the rest with my duties, of course."

So that's what set all this off, huh? Good for you, Mr. Fisalis! Welcome to normalcy. This change of heart is commendable.

"If you've really reformed, I'm sure everybody will be ecstatic!" *Rohtas' workload will diminish, for one, as will the servants' anxiety levels. Two birds, one stone!!*

"Reformed..." He smiled bitterly.

"You came out with all that mushy stuff out of nowhere earlier, so everybody was taken aback, but I bet that right around now, the meaning of your words will finally be sinking in, and they'll be in an uproar!" *Well, that said, I doubt they'd be dancing on the tables; maybe they're at least holding back tears?*

"I think that's exaggerating a bit. But I'm sure Rohtas is using this as an opportunity to compile huge amounts of paperwork regarding the territory's affairs."

Mr. Fisalis must have pictured the mountains of papers, because his expression already looked exhausted. Of course, I too could easily picture Rohtas carrying over terrifyingly huge stacks of documents with an evil smile. *In the not too distant future, I guess.* "You're not wrong."

"Hahaha. Well, I'll give it my best shot."

"I'll help out in any way I can!" *I can hand out pearls of wisdom, as long as it's the wisdom of the poor!* As encouragement, I held one of his hands in my hands.

"Thank you. I appreciate it."

"If you show everybody you mean it and these aren't just empty words, they'll be so relieved!" *"Young sir, he's back in action!" they'll say. Also, I just really like calling him "young sir." Hee hee!*

"That's what I'll do. But I also need to be clear about my intentions. To the servants, and to you..." he said, looking at me with a serious expression once

again.

What is it this time, I wonder?

Mr. Fisalis gently removed my hands from his, just so he could squeeze mine in his. Then he pulled my hand to his shapely lips. “I was lying when I said it at the wedding, but this time I say it from the heart. I, Duke Cercis Tinensis Fisalis, promise to love Viola Mangelica Fisalis, till the end of my days.” He slowly pressed a kiss to the back of my hand.

Huh!? ...Was that a wedding vow kiss just now!?



It's the traditional kiss from wedding ceremonies in Flür! It happens after the affirmation to the priest ("Do you vow to love each other until death do you part?" "I do!").

Ah, but we were both pretending back then... wait, that's not what I should be thinking about right now!! He just kissed me!! Plus, he kissed me after saying the vows, so he must really mean it, right?

The memory of our wedding day rushed back to me. The state church within the royal palace, where few aside from royalty are ever allowed. I remembered his sparkling smile and the hand he stretched out to me. Both were insincere. And I recalled the extravagant, gorgeous dress and accessories I was decked out in, and how I smiled back "happily."

The lavish wedding ceremony, where the great number of invitees showered us with both their blessings and their envy (yes, there was jealousy there too), was all a sham.

I'd said the vow back then, just like I was supposed to. But I hadn't meant it, and my happiness was equally false. *I'm sorry for deceiving you, Mr. Priest, Your Majesty—everyone at the ceremony! I feel kinda guilty about that now.*

By contrast, we were now surrounded not by a stately church but a beautiful sunset glow. I had no dazzling dress, and there was no throng of party guests showering us with well wishes. He was simply gazing at me with frank eyes. So why was this striking such a chord in me? This time, the kiss represented his true intentions—his true vow.

Mr. Fisalis squeezed my hand once more. "You can give me your wedding vow kiss when you're more certain of your feelings. I'll be waiting," he said, smiling tenderly.

"O... kay." I may have told him he was "family" to me, but as of late... he was starting to be more than that. At first, I hadn't cared much at all about where he was or what he was up to. I only started being remotely interested in him after his girlfriend had left. Then, I was worried when he went off to war, and at the military departure ceremony, I got huffy when he was treated differently than the infantry. Plus it really irritated me to see him surrounded by pretty ladies.

Unlike him, my experience levels with regard to romance were low, so I didn't really know how to express these feelings. And now he'd changed because of me... or was it *for* me!? Whichever it was, all I knew for sure was that Mr. Fisalis was legitimately, genuinely trying to change.

Though we started off as a loveless show couple who got married out of personal convenience, he'd actually started caring about me at some point. He'd even broken things off with the mistress who had supposedly been so dear to him. He'd started to consider my feelings. He'd changed, albeit bit by bit.

And then to be hit with a vow of true love! He'd told me a bunch of times that I was important to him, that he *treasured* me, but I never thought for a second that he'd ever declare it this definitively and this suddenly! It was all too fast for a romance rookie like me! *For real, hold your horses! My heart can't take it yet!*

(To Be Continued)

Side Story — After the Fight with Calendula

1 — In Aurantia

I, Calendula—the mistress of a nobleman from one of the foremost families in the Kingdom of Flür—broke up with Cercis Tinensis Fisalis due to a confluence of factors. Though to be frank, it was mainly because his heart had gone to his legal wife.

Feeling that I'd become an unwelcome guest, I bailed from the ducal manor, and now I live in Aurantia, the nation on Flür's southern border.

I started off as a wandering dancer to begin with, so now I'm dancing and entertaining customers again at the Black Cat, the most prosperous tavern in Aurantia's most prosperous town. The owner likes me, I've got a pretty good place to crash, and I make decent money, too. The old geezer... rather, the owner's genuinely fond of me, but he's also constantly asking me:

"So, when are we gonna be an item?"

How about never. I wouldn't be that greasy old man's lover for anything in the world. He'd get his greasiness all over me. I'll aim for a nicer catch if at all possible, thank you very much!

"My, you do know how to brighten a lady's day." I always reply evasively, wearing my trademark bewitching smile.

Someone who likes me even more than the tavern owner is this country's second prince, Fragrans Val Aurantiacus. He's top brass in Aurantia's military, so he and his military mates come here now and then to have me wait upon them.

He's a prince, so he's a nice catch in that sense, but... if I had to sum him up in a word, it'd be "letdown." He's got a well-chiseled face, sure, but... eh, he's nothing special in the looks department. He's *ordinary*. As for his physique, he's slender, I guess, but... he's really more gangly than elegant. And he's shallow... ahem, I mean, he's a flirt. I can scarcely believe he's fit for a top military rank.

Either he's just got the kind of face that women fancy in Aurantia, or he's a delusional narcissist who thinks the opposite sex can't resist him.

Sorry, I'm familiar with unparalleled handsomeness, so I can't help but think of you as mid-tier or lower. Let's just chalk it up to a difference in beauty standards, shall we?

But the real kicker is, he's got loose lips! Almost every day he comes to me and says things like, "I've got military training tomorrow. Well, I say training, but really we'll be laying waste to our eastern border," or "We're buying new weapons soon. But that's still a secret." He's just leaking vital intel *constantly*.

For real, if somebody this bird-brained is in charge, is this country going to survive?

Speaking of military VIPs, Cercis (my ex, whose appeal took a nosedive when he started getting all lovey-dovey with his legal wife and I decided to dump him) is one too. But he didn't go around leaking important info—not even once. That's the kind of man he is.

Just as I was thinking about Cercis, I overheard the prince say:

"If we attack Flür and make it a vassal state, this country will get rich too, right? We could bleed them dry. I mean, we can do whatever we want to a vassal state."

He and his mates were doubled over with laughter. They engaged in this sort of frivolous merrymaking night on every day while I waited on them from off to the side, and today was no exception.

I think he's twenty-six, but he's still so immature! It really feels like there's nothing in that skull of his.

That reminds me, the girls at the tavern did talk amongst themselves about it. Something along the lines of:

"Sir Fragrans looks handsome enough, but I'm guessing he was spoiled as a child, because he seems a little unreliable."

"Oh yeah, a hundred percent. And no one ever reprimands him, so there's no sign he'll ever improve."

“I mean, if anybody did tell him off, heads would roll. So nobody can afford to.”

That aside, the prince’s utterance of the familiar name of “Flür” startled me for a second. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not all that attached to Flür... and yet...

I wore the forced smile I usually put on at work in order to hide my momentary discomposure, and continued to listen while perfunctorily pouring some drinks.

The prince got uncomfortably, intimately close to me and said, “If my country got rich, I could give you a little more spending money, you know? And I could buy you *loads* of fancy clothes and stuff.”

Could you stay out of my personal space? Talk about irritating. But I can’t let that irritation show. That’s just good business.

“You could?” I said, tittering. Whatever it takes to get through this one-sided conversation.

I do love me a man of wealth and status, but I don’t need a moron like him. After all, if I don’t play my cards right, I could get caught up in some nasty fallout. I can see it now—people going “this whole war is her fault” or “it’s her fault the country’s ruined.” I’m not about to let that happen because of little mister prince over here. My safety and wellbeing are number one in my book.

Plus, there’s all this talk about invading and subjugating a foreign land, and no talk of just cause. Where’s the justice in that? A war would just bring danger closer to yours truly, and I can’t allow my precious self to be harmed. It’d be nothing but a hassle.

And to think, they’d be fighting the kingdom of Flür. I do owe Flür a bit for providing me a place to live for a time. I’m obligated to at least give them a little intel.

2 — After the Fight

It was at a tavern that I met Cercis, too. He was so young back then. I guess he wasn’t as important then as he is now. I wasn’t really interested in that stuff, and didn’t know much about it anyway, so I forgot.

Cercis flirted with me aggressively, and I was impressed by all the affection, so I became his lover. The opposition was fierce, though. They pushed marriage talks on him in order to split us up by any means necessary. He found himself a show wife in order to silence them, but before I knew it, he actually caught feelings for her.

That's when my life of luxury started falling apart—and that's why I marched up to the main building of the Fisalis manor to give that wife of his a piece of my mind, on that fateful day just before suppertime. I'd tried so many times to storm in, but I never managed to cross paths with her—or more accurately, they wouldn't let me. But that day I was lucky enough to surprise her at the entrance.

My first impression of her was, well... more innocent and cute than glamorous, I guess. And the servants willingly looked after her.

A neat and pretty young lady who was born well-off, I thought. The exact opposite of me!

The servants all circled the wagons, and I ultimately ended up having a chat with Rohtas, who got angry as usual. That's right—it was just a little chat. But I hadn't come to talk with some scheming butler. I *came* to tell wifey not to throw a wrench in my plans for a cushy life, where I got anything I wanted and did whatever I pleased! I came to tell her to take a hike!

The tension was thick as that sinister butler and I glared at each other, but Cercis just so happened to return from work at that moment.

The root cause of this is you. At the beginning of the "married" period, you didn't darken the doorstep of the main house, just like it was before you got married. You were always with me, and left your show wife to her own devices. But now? Now it looks like she's actually caught your eye, and you've started to spend more and more time with her.

For your information, it's not as if I can't stand the thought of eating my meals and spending my nights alone, all right? What I don't care for is how you've lavished so much money on me, only to jump ship when you've suddenly gotten the tiniest bit fond of your wife. Your show wife. The wife you only married so that we could have fun together without a care in the world. Are you telling me

your heart changed in a handful of months? You've got to be kidding me!

The more I thought about it, the deeper I dug myself in. My resentment had increased, and even when I was with him, we'd just get into constant fights. The atmosphere between us had turned sour, and our relationship had become strained. I'd finally come to the manor when I'd reached the limit of my patience. *Give me back my cushy life!* That's what I'd come to tell her.

...But I ended up being taken by surprise. As Cercis and I were arguing, that little girl stepped in to stop us! And she didn't hesitate to speak her mind, either. I like girls like her. And I even started feeling a bit of good will toward her for blasting Cercis with her own opinions, too.

Add that to that the fact that she apparently hadn't noticed her husband's feelings, and I couldn't help but laugh out loud. I was well past being shocked at that point. *Sorry, Cercis, but that's hilarious!* In that moment, I think I even started to get over my resentment.

That was the perfect moment to call it quits, but to my embarrassment, I didn't capitalize on it. "I'm all too happy to give you away to your wife, you pathetic man!" I'd said.

And her reply? "Nooo, no, no, no!" *Oh, I'm out of here. And you'll be the one stuck looking after Cercis!* Looking at his totally clueless wife, laughter welled up inside me once again. *Cercis, she's quite the formidable opponent. You won't get her to fall for you without some blood, sweat, and tears!*

Cercis was frozen in shock, dumped by his girlfriend and rejected in no uncertain terms by his wife. I left him there and withdrew to the cottage.

Once inside, I thought to myself, *I have a whole lot to do!* Just then, Cercis quietly slipped inside before taking a seat on the sofa, visibly dejected. *Hoho... chased out by the wife, I take it?*

I had no reason to console him, so I decided to simply ignore him. I took out a trunk and retrieved dresses and jewels one after another from the closet. There was too much to carry, so I couldn't take it all with me.

"Guess I'll sell the dresses. That fine by you? Cercis."

“...Whatever you want,” he said, his head still hanging. He showed no sign of getting out of his slump (not that I cared).

“Thanks.” *You’re still feeling that sorry for yourself? Were you always this limp-wristed? If he’s going to be that tiresome, then I don’t mind dropping him one bit.*

I packed only the dresses I needed for the meantime, and left the rest to be sold tomorrow or sometime after.

“The jewels I’m taking with me. They don’t take up too much space, and I can sell them a bit at a time to fund my travels.”

“I’ll give you some traveling money as well.”

“Appreciate it.” I didn’t even look at him as I assiduously made my preparations to move out.

What’s that? You’re wondering what happened to him afterwards? He slept on the sofa, and it didn’t look terribly comfortable.

When I got to the carriage, I simply asked the driver, “Could you take me south?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

South of the kingdom of Flür lies a country named Aurantia. Before my stint in Flür, I’d dropped by Aurantia for a short visit, way back when. The people there are simpletons... *ahem*, that is to say, they love their simple pleasures, like booze and brawls. They’re a hotblooded bunch, but a cheerful folk all the same. Which makes them born suckers!

...Whoops, I do beg your pardon. I let what I really think slip out. In any case, I think it’s the perfect country for someone like me, who makes a living as a tavern dancer.

As the outside scenery drifted by, I reflected on my exchange with his wife. When I said, “You really don’t think much of him, do ya?” she answered with “Uh, hmmm... not really?” When I said I loved discovering his wonderful side, she said, “What if it’s too hard?”

She’s a straight shooter. And above all, would a normal girl express concern

over where her husband's mistress is headed? The very existence of a mistress is supposed to be suffering for a wife. What an odd duck! But I don't dislike her.

She's the kind of person who, when I told her, "He's all yours now, *Madam!*" she responds with, "If you're ever back in the capital, please do drop by!" I mean, who says that?

The rattling Fisalis family carriage took me to the border between Flür and Aurantia, but would go no farther. From here on out, I'd have to fend for myself.

After I watched the carriage leave for the capital, I searched for a carriage to take me into Aurantia.

3— Secret Meeting

I entrusted a letter (the gist of it being "contact ASAP") to a trader who'd come to Aurantia from the nearby Fisalis territory for business. After a while, someone claiming to be a subordinate of Cercis' turned up as a messenger. I wrote a concise note concerning what the second prince had said and handed it over to him. I had no way of knowing whether that messenger actually was who he claimed to be, but at present, I had no choice but to believe him. If he wasn't, well... I'd just have to steel myself for that possibility.

Luckily, he was, in fact, the real deal. Flür responded swiftly, and Cercis and his corps mobilized for a recon mission.

From that point onward, I observed the second prince's words and deeds attentively. It appeared that what he was saying was no mere bluster. Aurantia truly was steadily preparing for war.

I wondered whether to send another letter detailing what I'd seen and heard. If any Aurantian loyalists found out what I was doing, I'd be in hot water. Imagine my surprise when Cercis marched right into Aurantia himself!

"Long time no see," said Cercis, appearing at the Black Cat out of the blue. As one might have expected, he was in disguise, as he wasn't wearing his usual well-tailored, expensive clothing. Instead, he was dressed in slightly worn-out attire befitting a traveling merchant. His beautiful dark brown hair was casually

styled, without a trace of glamor or shine. And on top of that...

“What’s with those lame glasses...?” This was my first time meeting him in quite some time, but I had to restrain myself from laughing out loud. I figured he had them on to keep from standing out, given how handsome he was, but he was seriously wearing black-rimmed spectacles with *incredibly* thick lenses! I literally couldn’t look him in the eyes. I was dying inside!

When he noticed I was holding in a laugh, he got all sullen.



“...It’s a disguise.”

“Yeah, I get that.”

I got the feeling Cercis wasn’t too thrilled with this get up. He seemed to be in a sour mood. *Well, it’s necessary, so suck it up.*

From then on, Cercis and I met and conversed in secret more than once. Being a high official in the military, it stood to reason Cercis couldn’t just waltz into an enemy country unattended, so every time he came to the Black Cat, he was accompanied by three male subordinates and two female subordinates dressed as men.

Bringing female subordinates with him was probably just a courtesy to his wife. *Unless he’s totally henpecked now? Could it be...? That’d be hysterical!*

The female subordinates stood watch over me and Cercis. Well, I guess they were observing him more than me, maybe. And it looked as though Cercis was being careful not to touch me at all. A man named Corydalis always sat next to me.

“If you’ll excuse me,” said Cercis, standing up.

“Where are you going? I’ll come with you!” said a silver-haired female subordinate of his.

“I’m going to the privy! Don’t follow me!”

“Oh, it’s okay! I’ll just accompany you to the entrance!”

You’re going that far!? Wow, Cercis, absolutely nobody trusts you! The sight of a weary Cercis was just too funny. I’m sure I looked judgmental while I watched this exchange.

I slipped information into the intervals of our trifling conversation. And I was extremely careful not to be overheard by potential eavesdroppers. *This kind of intrigue is, like... actually pretty fun.*

Meanwhile, the second prince was at it again, leaking classified information left and right. “Bought some cutting-edge weapons, we did. They’re *projectile* weapons! Flür won’t stand a chance!” “If the rear is closed off by a sheer cliff, the area will be a cinch to defend.”

Does he not understand that we're not all his allies here? Does he not suspect I might be a spy? ...My head hurts. If a cretin like him is a big shot here, then I feel sorry for this country. Guys like him ought to be kicked to the curb.

Eventually, the war began. Apparently, Flür had worked out a thorough battle plan, as they seized the initiative easily, and the military, led by that easygoing second prince, was pushed into a corner in no time flat. The ladies at the tavern were starting to sweat:

"It's only a matter of time before Aurantia capitulates."

"Maybe we should flee the country."

"Flür doesn't mean any harm to us. I don't think they'd actually invade..."

I should probably leave Aurantia, too. This country's a sinking ship.

Just as I was wondering where to go next, a messenger from Flür arrived stealthily at my living quarters. It was one of the male subordinates under Cercis who had come to our tavern meetings. "The war will soon be over, Ms. Calendula. We will be the victors, naturally. I think you should leave this country."

"Because I was an informant?"

"That hasn't been discovered yet, but there's no guarantee it'll stay under wraps forever. If you stay, we can't protect you from any harm that might befall you."

"...True. So, where should I go?"

"To Umber. It's an ally of Flür, and it's more or less just as peaceful and affluent."

"I see."

"We've set your departure for three days from now. We will come fetch you under cover of darkness."

"Got it."

I hadn't spent much time in this country, so packing didn't take long. Thanks to the tavern owner's generous wages, as well as the money I'd been given

when I left the duchy, I wasn't going to be hurting for cash for a while.

I stuffed my things one after the other into my bag. All I told the tavern was, "I'm off on another trip." I literally stepped straight past the clingy owner ("please, be my mistress!") and boarded the carriage sent by Flür.

"We'll be headed to Umber after we enter Flür. We'll need to cross the mountains, so it will take around two days," said the female knight who came to pick me up.

"I see... Thanks for taking me," I said, nodding to show her I understood. "Could you give this to your commander's wife for me, please?" I was referring to the letter I penned to Mrs. Fisalis before I left home. Just thought I'd try writing her a letter, that's all.

The knight took it with a dubious look on her face. "Understood." She tucked it neatly into her breast pocket.

Now then, another journey awaits! They say the Kingdom of Umber is a land of plenty, so here's hoping there's no shortage of suckers!

Extra — Calendula's Letter to Viola

Are you doing well, Madam—or should I say Mrs. Fisalis? I'm doing good. I saw Cercis for the first time in a while, but nothing steamy happened, so don't worry. If you think I'm lying, ask the girls under him. They were watching him like hawks! You look so innocent, but you've got him on a short leash, don't you? It didn't seem as though you had any interest in him, so to think you'd be as jealous as that... It's okay; there was no fooling around, I promise. I'm currently heading someplace new. I'll make a living somehow. Good luck going forward, Mrs. Fisalis!

“Oh my god! She does think I'm the jealous type!!”





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Can Someone Please Explain What's Going On?! Volume 4

by Tsuredurebana

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